



**USA
TODAY
SPORTS**

ON SALE THROUGH JULY 25, 2022

- Conference previews, projected records
- Schedules for every FBS and FCS team
- High-profile coaches soak up new surroundings
- After down season, Clemson bets on itself

2022 COLLEGE FOOTBALL PREVIEW

STAR STRUCK

**Young and Stroud nearly pushed their teams to the brink.
What's their encore this season?**



BRYCE YOUNG ALABAMA QUARTERBACK



C.J. STROUD OHIO STATE QUARTERBACK



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CAN DAWGS MAKE ANOTHER RUN?

LSU fizzled out after one title run. But Kirby Smart doesn't see his program as a "flash in the pan" thanks to its consistency. Page 18. TREVOR RUSZKOWSKI/USA TODAY

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Offseason full of (coaching) changes

Erick Smith
USA TODAY

Offseason changes among college football coaches are one of life's constants along with death and taxes. This winter, however, was one not experienced in the recent history of the sport. Instead of the usual practice of hiring an accomplished assistant or the head coach of a smaller program, some of the biggest schools filled their vacancies by poaching some of the biggest names from the highest level.

It was as unsettling as it was surprising, illustrating to the elite that even though your team is winning, and your coach is making millions, there is always the possibility of a coaching search right around the corner.

The dominoes began when Southern California fired Clay Helton two games into last season. That unusually early move should have been a warning sign that this coaching carousel would be different. There would be more premature changes to come. LSU announced it would part with Ed Orgeron in October, less than two years after he won a national title. Gary Patterson also was out of a job that month after 20 years at TCU. So too was Matt Wells at Texas Tech and Washington State coach Nick Rolovich, who refused to get the COVID-19 vaccine. November would bring changes at Washington, Virginia Tech and Florida.

The Helton dismissal was unique. It created almost 2½ months of speculation about a job deemed one of the most favorable in the country but involving a program that had lost its way. Urban Meyer, James Franklin, Matt Campbell and Luke Fickell were mentioned as potential candidates. One name not in the discussion was Oklahoma's Lincoln Riley.

Seen as one of the top offensive minds in football, Riley appeared comfortable with the Sooners. There were rumors of his interest in LSU before a declaration that he was not going to



Billy Napier went 40-12 at Louisiana Lafayette before becoming the new head coach at Florida.
DOUG ENGLE/OCALA (FLA.) STAR-BANNER

Baton Rouge after Oklahoma lost to Oklahoma State on Nov. 27. The next day, Riley was announced as the USC coach, an unlikely lateral move among programs that were on the top of the college football food chain. It was a curveball few expected.

It wouldn't be the only one. Brian Kelly left after 12 seasons at Notre Dame for LSU, a switch that was maybe more shocking than Riley's given the cultural fit

of a 60-year-old Midwestern coach from Boston in the deep waters of the Southeastern Conference. Kelly's name also was not mentioned throughout the Tigers' hiring process by the Tigers, with focus mostly on Texas A&M's Jimbo Fisher, Michigan State's Mel Tucker and Oregon's Mario Cristobal.

Cristobal – one of the nation's top recruiters – didn't take that job but he would be departing the Ducks. His alma mater

Miami (Florida) came calling and finally cut ties with Manny Diaz when their deal with Cristobal, their former offensive lineman, was confirmed.

To quantify how significant these moves were, it's worth looking at the numbers both on the field and off. Riley was 55-10 with three College Football Playoff appearances in his five seasons at Oklahoma. Kelly won more games than any other coach at Notre Dame and went

ODDS TO WIN NATIONAL TITLE

Alabama	1.85-1
Georgia	3.3-1
Ohio State	4-1
Clemson	12-1
Texas A&M	20-1
Oklahoma	30-1
Southern California	30-1
Michigan	40-1
Notre Dame	40-1
Oregon	50-1
Wisconsin	50-1
Utah	50-1
Florida	70-1
Miami (Fla.)	70-1

Source: Tipico Sportsbook

to one BCS title game and two College Football Playoffs. Cristobal won 31 games in his three non-COVID-19 seasons at Oregon and earned two Pac-12 titles. Riley's deal is expected to pay him more than eight figures annually. Kelly and Cristobal aren't far behind and both reportedly have deals for 10 seasons. Such is the commitment required to make these moves.

The reaction by Oklahoma, Notre Dame and Oregon was coincidentally similar. Instead of following the example of the schools that raided them, each hired an elite defensive coordinator, with the Sooners bringing back former assistant Brent Venables, the Fighting Irish promoting Marcus Freeman and the Ducks grabbing Dan Lanning from Georgia.

There would be no more major surprises. Florida would hire Louisiana Lafayette's Billy Napier, TCU snagged Sonny Dykes from SMU and Washington lured Kalen DeBoer from Fresno State. Washington State, Virginia Tech and Texas Tech would all hire assistants. All would seem normal in any other cycle.

However, this cycle was anything but normal. Over the next six pages, we profile the biggest head coaching names to switch jobs as they get settled in their new spots.

Kelly building new LSU foundation

Koki Riley

The (Lafayette, La.) Daily Advertiser

BATON ROUGE, La. — Brian Kelly walked into the Bill Lawton Room for the first time wearing a blue suit, lavender-collared shirt and a purple tie with white stripes.

The mumbling stopped and the cameras clicked. Kelly slowly made his way to his seat at the bottom row closest to the door of the press conference room with his family following. It was the morning of Dec. 1, 2021, and Kelly was about to be introduced as the football coach at LSU.

Few could believe what was happening. Kelly, less than 48 hours earlier, was the coach at Notre Dame and there was nothing to suggest that he would split. He was the winningest coach in program history and the Fighting Irish were a Cincinnati or Alabama loss away from likely making the College Football Playoff.

Why would he leave?

“When you get an opportunity to talk to (athletic director) Scott Woodward, and he presents a clear vision, the plan here and the opportunity, it was an exciting vision for me to look at,” Kelly said in December. “And as I got a chance to speak to more people about this opportunity, I just felt it was something that I had to take on.”

As the months wore by after the initial shock, Kelly’s decision to leave became clearer. He admitted that he was frustrated by Notre Dame’s tepid responses to his requests for a team chef and improved practice facilities. He talked about his enjoyment of Louisiana’s warmer temperatures and the luxury of having elite recruiting talent within the state’s borders.

But none of those reasons individually are why the Massachusetts native with Midwest coaching roots came here.

“I’m here to win a national championship,” Kelly told ESPN. “I came down here explicitly for that purpose.”

Building the foundation to

win that title is what the first year under Kelly is all about. Despite having won a national championship less than 24 months before his hiring, LSU was far from accomplishing that goal again when he took over.

Under coach Ed Orgeron the last two seasons, LSU failed to post a winning record. The Tigers went 11-12 during that span and the roster was in shambles. They competed with just 39 scholarship players in the Texas Bowl on Jan. 4 against Kansas State.

They had rotated through assistant coaches and were slowly bleeding commitments from their 2023 recruiting class. LSU needed to reboot and Kelly was its answer.

So he went to work. Kelly overhauled LSU’s staff on and off the field, replacing all but one position coach and bringing in over 40 staff members by late March.

“Doing the things the way that he does. That culture, that belief system, that process; I wanted to be a part of that,” said Brian Polian, LSU’s special teams and recruiting coordinator who followed Kelly from South Bend.

Kelly then maintained the majority of LSU’s top commitments from the 2022 recruiting class and by the time national signing day ended, the Tigers had the No. 12 class in the nation — according to 247Sports — despite signing only 15 players.

The smaller incoming group of freshmen left them with 17 available scholarships. So LSU filled 15 of those spots through the transfer portal — well enough to be the No. 3 class in the country. The Tigers’ activity maintained their competitiveness in the short term, even if it was a strategy that Kelly sees as unsustainable in the long run.

“Look, that is not how I will build a program here at LSU year in and year out. But we need(ed) to address that gap,” Kelly said. “This isn’t Triple-A, this is the SEC.”

“So you better have a full roster of really good football play-



New head coach Brian Kelly replaced all but one position coach and brought in more than 40 staff members by late March to LSU.

ANDRE BROUSSARD/SPECIAL TO THE DAILY ADVERTISER

ers when you show up.”

As spring practices came to the forefront, the next step for Kelly and his staff was imprinting new work habits and raising standards.

Players were split into summer/spring workout accountability teams, otherwise known as “SWAT” teams, to promote competitiveness within the locker room. They were also required to fill out personal wellness questionnaires on their phones and their grades became a greater point of emphasis.

Even players’ diets were evaluated and managed more closely, with top nutritional performers announced at every position by the end of the spring.

“I didn’t know how much protein I needed to take every

day. I just (didn’t) eat bad stuff,” said senior linebacker Mike Jones Jr. “No, I need a certain amount of things. I need to hydrate this much. I need to take vitamins every day, I’ve never done that (before).”

Anytime a player fell out of line, there would be consequences. When Kelly noticed that star wide receiver Kayshon Boutte wasn’t attending team workouts heading into spring practices, he called Boutte out publicly. It didn’t matter if Boutte was going to be out for the spring with an ankle injury; everyone had to be engaged.

“Yeah, I threw a shot across his bow,” Kelly told USA TODAY Sports months later. “I don’t normally send messages in the media to players. I usually talk to them, but I didn’t know him

very well so it was the best way for me to kind of get his attention.”

Kelly has been beyond satisfied with Boutte’s involvement within team functions ever since. And the more he challenged his players to reach his standards as spring practices continued, the more they lived up to those heights.

“The building part of the process is fun,” defensive coordinator Matt House said. “And right now we’re at the ground level of that process and we’re just trying to establish everyday habits that grow into traits.”

LSU has come a long way since that shocking day in December, but a championship won’t be coming back to Baton Rouge overnight. The staff isn’t close to picking a starting quarterback; the offensive line has only one returning starter; the cornerbacks room has question marks.

Winning 10 or more games would be a pleasant surprise for LSU fans. It’s a lower level of expectations than what they’re used to, but this season has always been about building a foundation — something that was sorely missing during the final days of Orgeron’s tenure.

LSU is one of only two programs to have won more than two national championships this century. The Tigers have secured their past three titles with three different coaches, two of whom — Orgeron and Les Miles — hold much lesser track records than Kelly. (Nick Saban is the other.)

The pieces have always been there and they’ve done it before. Perhaps all that’s needed to get back to winning national championships is hiring the guy who showed up on his first day with a blue suit, lavender collared shirt and a purple tie with white stripes.

“I was not going to lose the opportunity of being with Brian Kelly at LSU,” Polian said. “How many places in the country would you leave Notre Dame for? Not very many. But this is one.”

Lanning, Oregon ready to ascend final step

Antwan Staley

The (Eugene, Ore.) Register-Guard

EUGENE, Ore. – Despite the number of changes inside and out of the Oregon program, expectations have remained high for the 2022 season.

That continues because of what coach Dan Lanning has done in Eugene in his six months on the job.

“Sustained success means having a vision and laid-out plan,” Lanning said. “We want to be progressive, effective and united. We will assess every facet of our program to avoid being stagnant.”

“Our approach throughout the organization will be built on being lifelong learners. We are going to be willing to be on the cutting edge. We are going to be willing to change.”

Lanning is only 36, but he has significantly impacted Oregon’s program during his brief time on the job.

After Mario Cristobal departed to take the coaching job at Miami (Fla.), Oregon’s recruiting class dropped from the top 10 in the nation to outside the top 50. Lanning hadn’t even been employed a week but was able to sign seven recruits during the early national signing day period. He followed that up by signing 17 players, which was good enough to have the best class in the Pac-12.

Along with adding some of the top high school talent in the nation, Oregon added several players through the transfer portal, including former Colorado cornerback Christian Gonzalez, former Washington defensive lineman Sam Taimani and former Auburn quarterback and 2019 SEC freshman of the year Bo Nix.

“Why not Oregon,” Nix said. “Always have great talent, always well-coached, a good conference. Each and every year, they are a team you know they could be in the College Football Playoff.”

Lanning has maintained that momentum during the summer as Oregon already has eight players committed to its 2023



“Sustained success means having a vision and laid-out plan,” Oregon coach Dan Lanning says. “We are going to be willing to be on the cutting edge.” CHRIS PIETSCH/THE REGISTER-GUARD

recruiting class.

Lanning’s background, which includes helping Georgia snap a 41-season championship drought, certainly helps when recruiting players. Following a stint at Alabama as a grad assistant and two years as inside linebackers coach and recruiting coordinator at Memphis, Lanning became Georgia’s inside linebackers coach in 2018. Lanning later became the Bulldogs’ defensive coordinator, where he worked alongside coach Kirby Smart, who became the head man at Georgia after being a defensive wizard at Alabama.

In Lanning’s final season as Georgia’s defensive coordinator, he oversaw one of the best defenses in the country. The Bulldogs were second in total defense as they allowed 267.9 yards per game. Georgia was also first in scoring defense, al-

lowing 10.2 points per game.

Lanning’s impact at Oregon hasn’t just been seen on the recruiting trail, but it has shown on the field as well. There were an estimated 42,000 fans at Autzen Stadium for the Ducks’ spring game in April.

Gone is the ultra-conservative offense of Cristobal, relying a lot on running the football. Lanning and offensive coordinator Kenny Dillingham showed during the spring game that they are planning to have a wide-open spread offense, very reminiscent of former Oregon and current UCLA coach Chip Kelly.

On the first play of the spring game, Nix completed a 70-yard pass to Seven McGee. But it wasn’t just about the offense; the Ducks and Lanning’s defense also created five turnovers and generated pressure.

“It’s fun to go against his de-

fense every single day,” Nix said. “When you play them – I played them three times – they had incredible packages. Guys are kind of everywhere.”

“His (Lanning’s) defense, that’s why he had the No. 1 defense in the country for two years in a row and maybe even three. Each defense he had, every year, they were solid up-front. They were solid in the front seven; they were solid in the back end.

“Now going against it every day, seeing why it happened, this person lined up wide, the little differences, at the same time for someone just seeing it, it looks like they are everywhere. I am just trying to grow and learn from it. Obviously, there are a lot of defenses I’ve yet to see, so I am excited to continue to grow and develop in my vision of seeing defenses and how they line up.”

Oregon has been used to competing for Pac-12 championships, winning two of the last three titles. But the one thing that’s eluded the Ducks is a national championship. Oregon has lost both of its national championship appearances, to Auburn (2010) and Ohio State (2014). Oregon also has a new challenger inside its conference.

Southern Cal hired Lincoln Riley in December and many consider the Trojans the favorites to win the 2022 Pac-12 championship. Utah, which won the 2021 conference championship by thrashing Oregon 38-10, returns several key starters, including quarterback Cameron Rising.

While the road to another Pac-12 championship has gotten harder, fans are hoping Lanning is the person to get them to the next step and enter Oregon into a stratosphere where it has never been.

Kelly took the Ducks to heights the program has rarely seen. However, after the 2012 season, Kelly left Oregon to coach the Philadelphia Eagles. Willie Taggart and then Cristobal left the Ducks for dream jobs in Florida.

Considering Lanning’s background coaching Southeastern Conference schools, Oregon fans could be a bit wary that Lanning could leave much like his predecessors. However, Lanning sees Oregon as a destination job and not a launching job.

“I said the same thing to our players, I’m not asking for you to trust me, I’m asking for an opportunity to earn your trust,” Lanning said. “I’m going to stay at Oregon as long as I can stay at Oregon and as long as Oregon will have me.”

“This is a premier job in the nation, not just in this league but in the nation. It was going to take a premier job for me to leave the situation I was in.

“I’m thrilled to be here because I know what we can do here. There doesn’t have to be a next step for me. This job can be the final step.”

Cristobal aims to restore Miami aura

Tom D'Angelo

The Palm Beach (Fla.) Post

CORAL GABLES, Fla. — If anyone is cut out to coach football at the University of Miami, it is Mario Cristobal.

The next man tasked with restoring the Hurricanes' brand and reputation was born and raised in the city. He's Cuban American. Green and orange run through his blood, winning two national championships during his career as a Hurricanes offensive lineman and then returning as an assistant coach. He's won conference titles at the highest level of college football as a head coach, something his alma mater has not done in 19 years.

The reason this hire just seems to be different from the parade of coaches who have arrived declaring "The U is back," and left, unable to live up to the high standards set decades ago, isn't just because he's one of them. It's because Cristobal does something better than any of his predecessors in the last two decades. Something that defined the Howard Schnellenberger, Jimmy Johnson, Dennis Erickson and Butch Davis eras.

He can recruit.

Cristobal, 51, knows the foundation to any program is built on recruiting. Coaches, facilities and resources are critical, but none of that will win games without good players.

And throughout his career, Cristobal has been successful securing the best players for his program.

Whether it was at Florida International as a head coach from 2007-12 or Alabama as an assistant from 2013-16 or his latest stop as the head coach at Oregon for the past four years, Cristobal walks into a living room with a purpose, and walks out with a commitment.

An elite recruiter, he was named the National Recruiter of the Year by 247Sports in 2015.

"You got to go grind," he said. "It's not just aimless effort and enthusiasm ... you really got to dig deep into the fit and once

you understand what that is then you got to go all-in and make sure the family understands how important that person is to your program, how they fit into your program.

"They got to see you have true passion, that you're genuine and authentic."

This is where Miami has failed the past two decades.

The Hurricanes have not been relevant nationally since leaving the Big East and joining the Atlantic Coast Conference in 2004. Miami has never won an ACC title and has finished ranked nationally six times, never in the top 10, in the past 18 years.

For a program that sees itself as a national brand, few have underachieved like Miami.

At Oregon, Cristobal won two Pac-12 championships and

played in the title game three times in four years.

"He understood the game itself and that told me he would be a good coach," said Erickson, who won two titles at Miami, both with Cristobal on the roster. "He was very smart, very physical, and he was a leader in that offensive front."

"He's one of us and he knows how to get it done. To me he's going to be a difference-maker."

And where all have failed in recent years is convincing the abundance of talent in South Florida to stay home. Elite recruits have fled Miami-Dade and Broward counties, heading for Alabama and Georgia and Clemson and other programs that have zoomed past the Hurricanes on the national landscape.

"Guys play football down

here not only because they want to but because they have to. It's a way of life down here. It's in their DNA," Cristobal said.

"There's a reason the entire country comes here to try to get the talent. It's time to make sure the talent stays home."

A former UM teammate and close friend, Carlos Huerta, calls Cristobal a "recruiting machine" and says when Cristobal is in his recruiting mode being around him is "irritating."

Considering he was hired weeks before the first signing period, Cristobal found his first class limited. He was forced to dig deep into the transfer portal to start the transformation.

But Cristobal still has a ways to go. Since Mark Richt led the Hurricanes to their lone ACC title game in 2017, where they were embarrassed by Clemson,

38-3, Miami has averaged seven wins a year.

The hyperactive Cristobal was not happy following the Hurricanes' spring game, saying the program has "a lot of work to do and we know that."

Still, ask his players and they will tell you things are different. The first step is those players buying in and believing the program is back on track.

"It was intense and we were really on each other," quarterback Tyler Van Dyke said about the entire spring.

The biggest difference from a year ago?

"More accountability and discipline," he added. "Making sure we are doing the right things on and off the field."

Now, Cristobal must make sure that translates into wins on the field.



New Miami head football coach Mario Cristobal encourages the home crowd during a Hurricanes basketball game against Florida State in January. LYNNE SLADKY/AP

Freeman puts imprint on Golden Standard

Mike Berardino

South Bend Tribune

SOUTH BEND, Ind. – For all the success Notre Dame has enjoyed over the past half decade, Marcus Freeman knows he wasn't hired to be a caretaker.

Following Brian Kelly on the heels of five straight seasons with 10 wins or more, including two trips to the College Football Playoff, it might have been tempting for the first-time head coach to maintain the status quo.

Instead, with the full support of Irish athletic director Jack Swarbrick, Freeman has taken the proven template Kelly left when he made the stunning jump to LSU and has sought ways to improve it at nearly every turn:

- **Recruiting** – Freeman held together the seventh-ranked 2022 class and quickly built the nation's top-ranked group of nonbinding commitments for 2023.

- **Internal communication** – Daily meetings were added to ensure all assistants and support staff were on the same page.

- **Teaching methods** – A 10-man group of assistants includes just three holdovers: offensive coordinator Tommy Rees, cornerbacks coach Mike Mickens and safeties coach Chris O'Leary.

Barely stopping for a breath along the way, the energetic Freeman has refocused the tradition-rich program on what he terms the Golden Standard.

"Challenge Everything" T-shirts were printed for the entire roster during spring practice, and Freeman, 36, seemed determined that didn't end up as just another empty motivational slogan.

"Basically what 'challenge everything' means is find a better way," Freeman said. "It's embracing our young generation. They're not standing for just what always has been done: 'Keep it the same.' They're willing to challenge everything. They're willing to find a better way. That's something I've em-



Marcus Freeman: "What 'Challenge Everything' means is find a better way. It's embracing our young generation. They're not standing for just what always has been done." MATT CASHORE/USA TODAY SPORTS

braced as a coach."

After one season on campus as Kelly's defensive coordinator, where he helped last year's edition go 11-2 – including a Fiesta Bowl loss to Oklahoma State – Freeman likes to say Notre Dame will "change you if you let it." The personal growth he has experienced as a father of six is something he hopes to engender for every player under his watch.

"As a football team, as a person, as an individual, challenge everything," said Freeman, who saw his stock skyrocket during four years as Cincinnati's defensive coordinator. "Really think about what you do and why you do it. And if there's a better way, say it."

Early two-touchdown underdogs for the Sept. 3 opener at Ohio State, where Freeman starred as a second-team All-Big Ten linebacker from 2004-08, Notre Dame must break in a first-time starting quarterback.

A spring battle proved inconclusive, but the job will fall to either sophomore dual threat Tyler Buchner (35 career pass attempts) or redshirt sophomore Drew Pyne (33). That expected learning curve will require patience from a fan base spoiled by four seasons of smooth sailing under Ian Book (30-5 as the starter) and Jack Coan (23-8, including his time at Wisconsin).

That combined mark of 53-13 computes to a career winning percentage of .803 for Book and Coan, now with the New Orleans Saints and Indianapolis Colts, respectively.

After losing All-America safety Kyle Hamilton to the NFL (14th overall to the Baltimore Ravens), the Irish will plug in Northwestern transfer Brandon Joseph, an All-American as a freshman. Also gone are two-time thousand-yard rusher Kyren Williams (fifth round to the Los Angeles Rams) and leading

receiver Kevin Austin Jr. (Jacksonville Jaguars undrafted free agent), which opens up plenty of touches for a running back group that includes speedster Chris Tyree, bruiser Audric Es-time and holdover Logan Diggs (coming off shoulder surgery).

Record-setting tight end Michael Mayer, a projected first-round pick, will draw plenty of attention in the passing game, especially with holdover receivers Avery Davis and Joe Wilkins Jr. coming off surgery and sophomores Lorenzo Styles and Deion Colzie finding their stride.

Freeman, after watching Coan fire a program-record 68 passes in the Fiesta Bowl, wants to reclaim the line of scrimmage on both sides of the ball. Veteran offensive line guru Harry Hiestand was lured out of semi-retirement to elevate a group that features three-year starter Jarrett Patterson at center and youthful bookend tackles Joe Alt and Blake Fisher.

New defensive coordinator Al Golden, the former Miami and Temple head coach who helped the Cincinnati Bengals reach the latest Super Bowl as a linebackers coach, will have edge rusher Isaiah Foskey and defensive tackle Jayson Ademilola at his disposal after both opted to return. Kurt Hinish (36 career starts) and Myron Tagovailoa-Amos (32) have moved on, but Harvard transfer Chris Smith joins interior options that include Howard Cross III and Jacob Lacey.

Leading tackler JD Bertrand, seniors Bo Bauer and Jack Kiser and a healthy Marist Liufau (ankle surgery) headline a deep group of linebackers that lost stalwart Drew White (35 career starts) to the pros.

Not including specialists Jonathan Doerer, who delivered two game-winning field goals last fall, and punter Jay Bramblett, who left for LSU as a grad transfer; the Irish must replace a combined 195 career starts off their 2021 roster.

It should help that 28 returning players, not including the two transfers, made at least one start in 2021, but no one needs to remind Freeman it's been 33 seasons (and counting) since Notre Dame won its 11th and last national championship.

A pre-spring visit to the Orlando, Florida, area home of 85-year-old Lou Holtz, the author of that 1988 glory for the Irish, was arranged in hopes of fast-tracking the process. The last Notre Dame football coach to make it through his debut season with fewer than three losses was Ara Parseghian in 1964.

The last seven coaches to lead the Irish have gone a combined 52-32 in Year 1. That's an average of 4.6 losses.

"I'm not Nick Saban," Freeman said during a talk on leadership at Notre Dame's business school. "I don't know exactly what the process truly is yet to be the national championship head coach. Until I truly figure it out, my thought process is, 'Let's work as hard as we can. Let's outwork every opponent that we have.'"

Riley generates sky-high expectations at USC

Josh Peter
USA TODAY

LOS ANGELES – The expectations of Lincoln Riley are so immense, not even his first spring game as the head football coach at Southern Cal was immune from them.

David Carrillo, who wore a Trojan helmet to the game, said he was first in line at Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum at 7 a.m. – five hours before kickoff.

“Because I anticipated it being sold out,” Carrillo, 42, told USA TODAY Sports. “I was like, ‘It’s a new Lincoln Riley era. A bunch of players transferring in. It’s a new beginning pretty much.’”

Riley might turn USC into “the mecca of college football,” as he has promised he would at his introductory news conference.

He might win multiple national titles along the way, too, like Pete Carroll did for the Trojans almost two decades ago.

But a sellout crowd for the spring game, well ...

The Southern Cal Trojans faithful were about 44,000 fans shy of a packed house for the April 23 game. The official attendance was 33,427, despite the free tickets, sunny skies and a fan fest with giveaways such as 15,000 posters and 10,000 shirts.

ESPN televised the game, and among the highlights: Quarterback Caleb Williams, who followed Riley from Oklahoma to USC, completed his first nine passes, including two for touchdowns to fellow Oklahoma transfer Mario Williams.

“Hopefully we get to pack it out really soon,” Caleb Williams said of the stadium. “But it was awesome to come out here and get in front of a couple of fans and have ESPN and all of that.”

Riley, who inherited a team that finished 4-8 last season and a fan base desperate for hope, said, “Today was a great example of the progress that’s been made in a really short time. ... We’re not there yet. We’ve got a long ways to go. But we have made a ton of progress.”



“If you’re in this city and you don’t feel momentum about this program,” new Southern Cal head football coach Riley said Saturday after the spring game, “you’re not paying attention.”

KIRBY LEE/USA TODAY SPORTS

The crowd of 33,427 at the Coliseum was not officially the biggest for a USC spring game, but rather the most since “at least the late 1990s” based on available records, according to the school’s sports information department.

USC’s last pre-pandemic spring game drew an estimated crowd of 2,000, the Los Angeles Times reported.

For what it’s worth, this year Southern Cal had a bigger spring game crowd than did Alabama (31,077) and Auburn (29,346), and maybe everything isn’t measurable.

“If you’re in this city and you don’t feel momentum about this program,” Riley said, “you’re not paying attention.”

In the seven months since the university hired Riley, he has begun the crucial work of rebuilding – recruiting.

Although he got a late start with high school prospects, he has taken full advantage of the transfer portal.

The current haul includes Oregon transfer Travis Dye, a running back who last season led the Pac-12 with 1,673 all-purpose yards; Williams, the Oklahoma transfer and a wide receiver who as a freshman last season caught 35 passes for 380 yards and four touchdowns; and Alabama transfer Shane Hall, a linebacker who made 13 starts in three seasons and was a freshman All-American.

But the gem of the class is Caleb Williams, who last year at Oklahoma threw for 1,912 yards and 21 touchdowns with four interceptions while completing 64.5% of his passes. He also rushed for 442 yards and six touchdowns.

“Has he improved? Yes,” Riley said. “Like everybody else on this roster, I think he has. He’s taken steps.

“He’s getting better. He’s getting more comfortable. He’s becoming a more seasoned, experienced quarterback.”

The results?

In what amounted to one half of football, the offense beat the defense 34-30 after the defense was staked to a 21-0 lead and earned three points for each of its three fourth-down stops.

Riley said he liked much of what he saw but spoke most passionately about the collective effort made by his team “to build a culture and to build a kind of standard within our program that we all believe in.”

In part, the culture requires thick skin.

Andrew Vorhees, a senior offensive lineman, said of Riley: “He’s not afraid to hurt anybody’s feelings. He’s not afraid to hold anybody accountable.”

Williams, who played for Riley at Oklahoma last season, offered some insight on how accountability works within Riley’s program. Williams suggested it hinges on player leadership, and the team leaders are meeting about once a week.

“One of the biggest things is

that elite teams are led by the players, held accountable by the players,” Williams said.

“Good teams, they’re led by the coaches and held accountable by the coaches. And poor teams, there’s nobody else there.

“We’ve been trying to be the elite team, so we’ve been having a lot of players step up into leadership roles, be more commanding, have a voice. But to have that, you have to work, and when you work hard you build loyalty, and you build trust, and then you have those moments where you can speak up and hold your teammates accountable.”

Miller Moss, the backup quarterback who endured last season at Southern Cal, wanted to share something.

“I don’t think we lacked the players and the personalities within the locker room to have good leadership,” he said. “I just think there wasn’t a form that fostered leadership, and I think Coach Riley and his staff coming in, we’ve been given a playbook, so to speak, on how to do that.”

After the press conference was over, Carrillo, the fan, was still wearing his Trojan helmet. He was on the field at the Coliseum. He said he is a Southern California native and traveled to Los Angeles from his home in Albuquerque, New Mexico, to the game.

“I anticipated it being sold out, but it’s LA,” he said. “You’re only going to get so many people out and we understand it’s just a spring game, too. But overall, I was pretty enthused about the size of the crowd and the energy that everybody had for the game.

“It’s just a breath of fresh air to have USC starting to feel like it’s starting to get back to where it should be.”

Riley might have been speaking for the fans – the ones who came and the ones who didn’t – when he said, “I’d be lying if I told you I wasn’t starting to think ahead a little bit to what it will feel like in the fall when it’s packed.”

Venables follows dreams back to Sooners

Berry Tramel

The Oklahoman

NORMAN, Okla. — Brent Venables always is telling his young daughters to dream big. To ignore the naysayers. To disregard limitations.

So last autumn, in their South Carolina home, Venables laid down with daughter Laney to say goodnight prayers and reinforce the message. This time she had a question about those big dreams.

"She says, 'Well, dad, why didn't you take the Auburn job last year?'" Venables related.

Venables, then almost 10 years into his job as Clemson's defensive coordinator, told his daughter he was a little nervous about the Auburn head coaching job, that War Eagle didn't have quite the right "alignment," and that he was a little scared to become a head coach, because of what it might do to his family time.

"You don't have to be scared," Laney said. "You told us to dream big. Chase your dream."

But that's the thing. Maybe Venables already was living his dream. Coaching football, getting paid handsomely, lovely family.

"I was always afraid that I would get so ingrained in my job that I would have to miss softball practice or taking the girls to school in the morning or missing a weekend tournament," Venables said. "I have so much fun. That's what living is all about. I was afraid a little bit at times of becoming a head coach because you might lose that balance."

College football has been talking for 20 years about Venables becoming a head coach, and last December he finally put his fear aside.

Not at Auburn or Miami or Kansas State or Texas Tech, places where Venables could have been a head coach by now. But at Oklahoma, where he spent 13 seasons as a Bob Stoops assistant, before spreading his wings at Clemson the last decade.

Seems an easy sell to say



"This is a no-brainer in my opinion," Brent Venables said of Oklahoma, where he spent 13 seasons as a Bob Stoops assistant. KEVIN JAIRAJ/USA TODAY SPORTS

Venables was waiting on the right job, one of the best jobs, sort of the way Stoops did so many years ago, except Stoops was 38 by the time he had turned down Arkansas, Dan Minnesota and Iowa to become a Sooner. Venables is 51.

Did Venables ever worry that it was getting late in the day, that he might be like OU icon Merv Johnson, one of the sport's most respected men but a career assistant, at big-time places for big-time coaches, like Frank Broyles at Arkansas, Dan Devine at Notre Dame and Barry

Switzer at OU?

"I didn't worry," Venables said. "Mindful, yes. And reflective on what would it look like or what would it look like if I didn't, that as well."

"I've had plenty of opportunities where I just bowed out on the front end or said no during the process. A year ago (Auburn) was probably closest."

You know, not every coach wants to be a head coach. And not every coach who wants to be a head coach CRAVES being a head coach, at all costs.

"I've had a great job" at Clem-

son, Venables said. "An amazing job. The quality of life, literally for the last 10 years, I went to work every day and I got filled up as a human being. And that's hard to quantify for some people."

"But I had perspective. I had awareness. I had appreciation. And I had a lot of fun. You try not to screw up happy. I learned that a long time ago."

Don't mess with happy. That's a lesson for us all. Whether it's Lincoln Riley leaving for Southern Cal or OU leaving for the Southeastern Confer-

ence or a newspaper guy leaving for ESPN, don't let status and money be the sole drivers. Remember to consider contentment.

That's the word that comes to mind when considering Venables. Contentment. Oklahomans have known him for 23 years, and whether he was screaming on the sideline or chatting about a midnight cheeseburger, he has always seemed content. Whether the fiery cub on Bill Snyder's remarkable Kansas State staffs, or a third wheel with the Brothers Stoops in the early days of the OU revival, or Dabo Swinney's chief lieutenant in the remarkable Clemson success story, Venables never seemed to need the spotlight that goes with being the boss.

Maybe that's why Venables spent two decades playing hard-to-get. He never needed what schools were offering. Until Joe Castiglione came calling.

"I'm a simple guy," Venables said. "I value some things that maybe other people don't, maybe more so. I value relationships. I value people. I value quality of life. And I value simplicity. Just because you become the head coach doesn't mean you can't keep things simple. You control that narrative."

"And listen, this is Oklahoma, all right? Alabama's never offered me a head job. I don't want to go down my small Rolodex of schools, but this is that program."

In other words, hard to turn down the Sooners.

"This is a no-brainer in my opinion," Venables said. "For all the reasons that I said — from the leadership to the alignment to the success of this program and its history and location and people. All of it."

The timing was exquisite. A month after Laney Venables told him to chase his dream.

"Sometimes you need just a little bit more encouragement to get you pulled through the knot-hole," said Venables, who laid down to say his prayers but was reminded that half of prayer is listening, too.

Bryce Young flashing the look again

Nick Kelly

The Tuscaloosa (Ala.) News

Bryce Young has had the look.

His dad, Craig Young, knows it well. He's witnessed it before. Several times, in fact, throughout the Alabama football quarterback's life. And it's back this offseason.

"I can see that look in his eyes where he's been so motivated," Craig said.

It appeared whenever Young spent the duration of an offseason day throwing, working out and lifting. Not traveling or taking a bunch of time off. Just working.

"I've seen that in him before," Craig said. "And I know what that means."

Craig saw that in 2016, when his son aimed to beat the incumbent upperclassman starter even though Young was a high school freshman. The quarterbacks ended up splitting time that year.

Then there was 2019. After he threw 39 touchdowns as a junior en route to all-state recognition, Young pushed to get even better. He ended up throwing for 58 touchdowns and rushing for 10 his senior year.

The look appeared again in 2021 when Young strived to take advantage of the open Alabama quarterback spot. He ended up winning the Heisman Trophy.

"This," Craig said, "looks very familiar to those times."

Young is fresh off a season that ended with a 33-18 loss to Georgia in the College Football Playoff championship game. It was only Young's fifth loss over his past four seasons.

Now, the quarterback who seldom loses has the task of responding to his greatest loss yet.

"He's hungry," said Taylor Kelly, a longtime quarterback trainer for Young. "It's the hungriest that I've seen him."

Miniature golf and bowling

The Young family competes at everything. Everything.

Miniature golf, bowling, board games. Even Uno. If there's a way for the Youngs to compete, they will.

The parents usually end up finishing second and third behind their son.

"Bryce is better at everything," said Julie Young, his mom, in New York before the Heisman ceremony. "It's like one of those things where you just sit there and go, 'Really? Really?'"

"It's so annoying," Craig added.

Young usually winning especially became the case once he reached his teenage and high school years.

"But on the occasions he would lose at miniature golf or bowling, he would be so mad," Craig said. "He wouldn't even talk to us. He'd be mad on the car ride home."

Then Young would usually get over it by the morning.

His disdain for losing hasn't changed as an adult. The difference is how he responds.

"I think the maturity comes in how you apply what happens to not make things go in your favor," Craig said. "How do you objectively look at those things? And then how do you make adjustments? And how do you use that to improve?"

"I think that's where his maturity is, because I think he's done a really good job of being internally motivated."

No time traveling

The first feeling Young experienced after the national championship game was hurt. Then came the anger.

At himself.

"You look back and wish you could have had plays back, moments back," Young said in the spring.

He watched the film once immediately to help him process everything.

Then he watched again in the spring.

A few other times, he said, he viewed it for self-scouting purposes.



Although Alabama's Bryce Young won the Heisman Trophy, the national championship game loss at season's end was just his fifth over his past four years. GARY COSBY JR./USA TODAY SPORTS

"You can't time travel," Young said, "So what am I going to do to get better, to learn from those mistakes? It's really been a process of turning that page for me and not looking at it as you want it back, but 'Alright, I did this. That wasn't successful. What can I do to grow?'"

Meanwhile, in the initial aftermath of the loss, his parents gave him the space he needed. That's their protocol, whether it's the national championship game or bowling.

Young doesn't want a bunch of hugs or attaboys, his dad said, but his parents will text him, send scripture and tell him they love him.

Once Young's done going through his process, he and his

parents talk and go through it together.

"The process was probably pretty familiar, but I think just the magnitude of it is what's different," Craig said of the national title loss. "In the short part of it, it sucks. He hates to lose."

Instead of moping or pouting, Young channeled that contempt for losing. He got to work.

'This year was a little bit different'

Many days in May looked similar for Young.

Staying in Orange County, California, the Alabama quarterback started the day with lifting. He has worked to add weight in the weight room this

offseason, Kelly said. Then Young would drive 10-15 minutes to a secluded turf field in Huntington Beach, right off Interstate 405. There, Young worked with Kelly, a quarterback trainer who played the position for Arizona State. Kelly was also his quarterbacks coach at Mater Dei High School in Santa Ana, California.

After the sessions in May with Kelly and others, Young would end with speed and agility work. He completed this routine three to four days a week during the time off in May.

"The way he approaches a workout and training in the offseason, it's at a high level," Kelly said. "But this year was a little bit different as far as some specific things he really wanted to achieve this offseason."

Positioning has been one area on which Young has worked. That could mean the positioning of his feet, his head or another part of his body. Maybe his feet were slightly out of place on a play or his head slid slightly on another snap. Small and almost unnoticeable to the uneducated eye but sometimes vital.

"He would almost make up for it just because he was so talented," Kelly said. "But there are times where it didn't work out."

So Young and Kelly worked to limit those times for the 2022 season.

Sometimes, they had some help. Per Kelly, Alabama teammates who came to work out with Young included new receivers Tyler Harrell and Jermaine Burton as well as Christian Leary and tight end Cameron Latu.

It's part of Young's effort to do more than only get himself ready for the season. The returning captain has a team to prepare with a national championship on the line in what will likely be his final collegiate season.

"Even though he had a lot of personal awards that he achieved this year," Kelly said, "I think he's even more hungry to get the one he's really after."

Stroud grows during breakout year

Joey Kaufman

The Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch

Before a breakout season that ended with a record-setting homecoming performance in the Rose Bowl and a finish as a finalist for the Heisman Trophy, C.J. Stroud took a bit of heat.

In Stroud's second game as Ohio State's starting quarterback, the Buckeyes suffered their first regular-season loss of Ryan Day's coaching tenure, stumbling against Oregon in a marquee non-conference game.

Much of the frustration among Buckeyes fans was reserved for a porous defense, but an interception thrown by Stroud in the waning minutes also ended a potentially game-tying drive and left them unsatisfied with the then-redshirt freshman passer.

The week following the setback, the Buckeyes bounced back, though Stroud put together a modest showing.

Second-guessing about his status as the starter grew. The chatter on message boards and social media centered on whether Day picked the wrong former blue-chip passer in the preseason competition.

Stroud said he never listened to much of the talk and felt secure in his spot atop the depth chart.

"I didn't care honestly," he said. "My coaches were happy with how I played. My teammates were happy with how I played."

It was something he learned to tune out.

"People are always going to talk," Stroud said, "good or bad."

While Stroud sought to keep even-keeled and follow Day's frequent advice of not to ride the emotional roller coaster that comes with playing the high-profile position, one adjustment proved critical in his development.

He got rest. Stroud sat out the final non-conference game against Akron.

In the season opener at Minnesota weeks earlier, he had taken a hard hit that led to a



C.J. Stroud (7) had to take a step back before he could complete his dynamic redshirt freshman season. ADAM CAIRNS/THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

separation of a joint in his right throwing shoulder.

The nature of the injury was not publicly known as the time, downplayed by Day in consecutive news conferences, but appeared to affect Stroud. Between throws, he often stretched his shoulder. Some of his passes wobbled.

The idea for rest originated with his mother, Kim, who encouraged her son to find time to allow his shoulder to heal.

She saw it as a practical move.

"I always want my children to take care of themselves," she said, "because one small thing could end up to be something bigger if you don't take care of it. I definitely tried all the home remedies, and they weren't working, so I told him, 'You need to take care of yourself.'"

"But he's a competitor, and he wants to be there for the team, and that was weighing on him."

The week on the sideline also provided Stroud with an emotional reset as he learned to handle the demands of the position.

"It was good to kind of get a rest from everything," he said, "and sit back and realize what position I'm in, and the responsibility that I have."

"Of course, physically I got to rest, and I got the shoulder corrected."

No surgery was required for Stroud, who returned behind center once the calendar flipped to October and the Buckeyes resumed their Big Ten schedule.

Over the following months, he was more precise from the pocket, and a quarterback who had not attempted a pass at Ohio State before last fall finished his debut season as a starter by throwing for 4,435 yards and 44 touchdowns.

Only three of his six interceptions came after the first three games.

A fully healthy shoulder allowed Stroud to pick apart secondaries across the Big Ten, distributing passes to a talented cast of playmakers that included Chris Olave and Garrett Wilson, both selected in the first round of the NFL draft this past spring.

Stroud, who is listed as 6-3 and 215 pounds, has prototypical size for a passer with the arm strength to stretch the field.

His grasp of the Buckeyes playbook and understanding of reading defenses have also had a hand in his success, complementing his skill set.

"I think it's a God-given talent," Stroud said. "I'm not crazy book smart, but I'm kind of smart when it comes to school. I try to do my best. That comes with effort and things like that. But with football, you either get it or you don't."

"I think it's one of those things God wanted me to have, and that has a lot to do with my

leadership of the offense."

Stroud remembers impressing Olave and Wilson with his knowledge of specific plays only days after he enrolled at Ohio State in early 2020.

As his command deepened, it gave him stature among teammates.

"Things like that, you can control the room or control your offense," Stroud said.

"When it came down to tough moments in games, dudes actually remember those things and they look at me like, 'C.J. knows what he's doing, I can trust him.'"

The dedication involves him watching a lot of film. After the Buckeyes play on a typical Saturday, he reviews the tape afterward, then again on Sunday and Monday before practicing on Tuesday.

He'll watch more on the upcoming opponent and anything related to its scheme. When Ohio State faced Michigan, he also caught up on the Baltimore Ravens, where Mike Macdonald, then the Wolverines' defensive coordinator, had previously served as an assistant before returning to the franchise this off-season.

"I wouldn't say it's a fear of mine," Stroud said, "but it's a worry of mine not to do enough. It's the worst feeling in the world to have regret, and I feel like when I approach anything in life, I do it 100%."

A similar drive will be needed for Stroud as he prepares for his second season leading the Buckeyes, one where he shoulders much of their expectations as a Heisman Trophy favorite and triggerman of an offense expected to remain among the highest-scoring groups in the nation.

As spring practice ended, Stroud said his focus ahead of the fall remained as sharp despite his broader profile.

"I'm not really attacking it different," he said. "I'm just trying to get better like I always do and lead my guys. My job is to make everyone around me better."

Amid changes, Clemson bets on itself



Dan Wolken
Columnist
USA TODAY

Dabo Swinney insists that Clemson is going to be fine, and he's probably right. When you've won as much as he has over the last decade, becoming the second-best program in college football behind Alabama, fading back to second-tier status isn't a consideration.

Clemson, in fact, has done everything in its power to ensure those days of piddling around as Atlantic Coast Conference underachievers are gone and never coming back. It has given Swinney everything he's wanted, starting with a 10-year, \$92 million contract that puts him in the highest echelon of coaching salaries. It has built top-of-the-line facilities. It has given him carte blanche to spend on assistant coaches and other staffers. He insists the program is in such good shape now, it could practically run by itself.

"If the good Lord took me out of here today, Clemson is built to last," he said last December.

But despite Swinney's assurance that the Clemson machine is still humming along, there is an unease around his program for the first time since it broke into the blue-blood club.

After missing the College Football Playoff for the first time since 2014, Clemson was forced into the biggest reset of Swinney's tenure when defensive coordinator Brent Venables became Oklahoma's head coach and offensive coordinator Tony Elliott got the head coaching job at Virginia. A handful of other people who had been crucial to Clemson's two national titles followed them out the door, including defensive line coach Todd Bates and director of operations Thad Turnipseed. Clemson also lost athletic director Dan Radakovich to ACC rival Miami, promoting his deputy Graham Neff to the top job.



After a lackluster season by his standards, Dabo Swinney (150-36 at Clemson) stayed in house to fill high-profile coaching changes.

KEN RUINARD/USA TODAY SPORTS

This is, in many ways, the norm at elite football programs where staff members are in high demand on the job market and thus constantly shuffling in and out. At Clemson, though, change has been pretty rare under Swinney.

Venables, arguably the top defensive coordinator in the country, stayed for a decade before Oklahoma finally lured him away. Elliott, who shared offensive coordinator duties with Jeff Scott until Scott left for South Florida in 2020, took the Virginia job after years of shunning opportunities to leave.

For a program that had been

built on an unusual amount of continuity, Clemson was suddenly forced to navigate an off-season of immense change — and it had to do it on the heels of a 10-3 season when there was obvious on-field slippage from the Deshaun Watson/Trevor Lawrence era teams that could beat anyone in the country.

"It's no different to me than when we lost Tajh Boyd and lost Sammy Watkins," Swinney said, referring to two players who helped build Clemson's foundation of success before it broke the national title ceiling in 2016. "You keep developing, keep growing, keep moving and

getting better. I love continuity, but I also love change and new opportunity."

Nobody bats an eye when Alabama loses a slew of assistants or Georgia shakes things up on the coaching staff. But Clemson's staff had been so stable for so long, it feels like a major flash point in whatever the next decade is going to look like for Swinney. Is this a much-needed reset that can inject fresh energy into Clemson, or is it a sign of trouble for a program on its way down?

Based on Swinney's history, it's foolish to bet against him.

"If people don't believe in me

after 13 years of what they've experienced at Clemson, they ain't ever going to believe in me," he says, citing seven ACC titles and 11 straight years of double-digit wins, things that hadn't been done regularly since the 1980s.

But what Clemson achieved between 2015 and 2020, losing just seven games total over six seasons, undeniably set a new standard. And in 2021, that standard was not met as the Tigers fell out of national and ACC title contention by the middle of the season with losses to Georgia, North Carolina State and Pittsburgh.

Though Clemson played bet-

ter in the back half of the season, knocking off nationally ranked Wake Forest and beating Iowa State in the Cheez-It Bowl, it was not the year anyone envisioned when the Tigers started at No. 2 in the preseason USA TODAY Sports AFCA Coaches Poll.

Was their underperformance due to youth? Injuries? A drop in talent level? All three of those things could have played a factor, but the last one is the most interesting.

After a smooth transition from Watson to Lawrence at quarterback, former five-star recruit D.J. Uiagalelei struggled with nine touchdowns and 10 interceptions. Will Shipley is a nice running back, but he's not in the class of Travis Etienne, a two-time ACC player of the year. After a long run of game-changing wide receivers coming through Clemson, the well finally ran dry.

Though Clemson certainly got its share of talent, especially at quarterback, it did not build a monster program the same way Alabama or Georgia did by stacking top-ranked recruiting classes. The secret sauce for Clemson had always been about talent identification, cultural fit, development and maximizing the ability of the five-star recruits it did land.

But college football has changed quite a bit over the last couple of years with players being granted one free transfer and the ability to make money off their name, image and likeness. Swinney is both highly stubborn and an undeniable traditionalist who rails against the so-called professionalization of college football. He also shunned the transfer market as Clemson became a national power and has said he will only look to the portal as a last resort to fill a roster hole rather than trying to aggressively upgrade certain positions.

Swinney can build the program however he feels is best – and he's earned enough credibility to do it his way. He deeply believes in his system and culture. But if Clemson can't get back to the national championship level, how much will Swinney be blamed for his slowness in adapting to the new world of



Will Shipley returns after leading Clemson with more than 700 yards rushing and 11 rushing TDs. KEN RUINARD/USA TODAY SPORTS

college football?

That's what will be at stake in the next couple of seasons, and that's why some fans were both disappointed and perplexed when Swinney – with all the Clemson cachet and a pile of money available for assistant coaches – went to the same playbook he's used before.

Rather than send a message that things had gotten stale at Clemson and hunt big-name coaches, Swinney replaced Elliott with Brandon Streeter, who had been on staff as the quarterbacks coach and recruiting coordinator since 2014. He elevated Thomas Austin from analyst to offensive line coach to replace retiring Robbie Caldwell. And on defense, he replaced Venables with Wes Goodwin and Mickey Conn, in-house promotions.

This thought process is, in essence, what drives Swinney: Not just showing his way works but that the Clemson culture he created is just as interwoven with the Tigers' success as the individuals who helped implement the X's and O's.

"I've always set the tone for what we do on offense and defense, and that's never going to change," he said. "We have a philosophy that's been in place here for a long time and every-

thing we do is within that philosophy."

But for every long-running college football dynasty, there's a fulcrum where greatness either multiplies or begins falling apart. Whether it's coaching changes, rule changes, conference realignment or arrogance, you can always look back on some moment or series of events where a program went one direction or the other.

There hasn't been this much change at Clemson since Swinney's fourth season when the Tigers got embarrassed 70-33 by West Virginia in the Orange Bowl. After that, he brought in Venables to run the defense and Chad Morris to overhaul the offense, moves that pushed Clemson up the ladder until it finally reached the top.

More than a decade later, Swinney has arrived at another inflection point with different and perhaps trickier stakes. Clemson has been in the mix for national titles long enough now that it's where fans and recruits think they belong. Whether Swinney can keep that going will be a direct reflection of the choices he's made over the last 12 months.

Clemson QB isn't taking starting QB job lightly

Todd Shanesy

The Greenville (S.C.) News

It's been heavy on his mind. And the scales.

Clemson quarterback D.J. Uiagalelei just weighed too much. He knew it. Two hundred sixty pounds, even at 6-foot-4, was not ideal. His knees were telling him to knock it off with the fast food and the sugar already.

"Big Cinco," his nickname from size and jersey number, is also "Big Sweet Tooth."

"I like eating ice cream," he said. "A lot."

At some point in January between pints of chocolate chip cookie dough and double fudge swirl, Uiagalelei decided enough was enough. His position on a 10-win team that defeated Iowa State in the Cheez-It Bowl was not to be taken lightly.

"After the Iowa State game, when I went back home, I was eating a lot. I was like, 'Dang, I've got to lose some weight.'"

Uiagalelei admitted he was well beyond 260 pounds not long after the season ended. By the start of spring practice in March, though, he was down to 240. By the start of fall practice in August, he would like to be 230.

Clemson's passing efficiency last year was worst in the Atlantic Coast Conference. It wasn't a problem with keeping Uiagalelei upright. The Tigers allowed the fewest sacks per pass attempt in the ACC. But Uiagalelei, especially after hurting a knee, wasn't always able to extend plays or wait for something deep. Although running ability was considered a strength, he never rushed for more than 50 yards in a game.

"We've talked a lot," quarterbacks coach and first-year offensive coordinator Brandon Streeter said. "We've had a lot



D.J. Uiagalelei admits he was hampered by excessive weight in 2021. KEN RUINARD/

THE GREENVILLE (S.C.) NEWS

of discussions, just about things to work on, starting with the footwork. Everything starts with that footwork. Timing comes from your footwork.

"We've had great communication about what he likes and what he feels comfortable with. I've been able to listen to him, hear him out on a few things he would like to do footwork-wise that he can be more comfortable with as long as it fits the offense and the timing of what we're trying to accomplish."

Uiagalelei is spending more time than ever in the film room, he said, and no longer brings snacks like it's movie night.

He's on a strict meal plan. He has food shipped. He eats smaller portions. He stays out of drive-thrus and candy aisles.

"I've always been big my whole life," Uiagalelei said. "So, being at the weight I was at, like 250 or 255, sometimes 260, I had that weight in high school and when I first got here. I didn't think it was a problem."

"If I want to be a better quarterback for the team, then losing weight is big. There are goals that I have in mind. If I want to be able to reach those, it's easy stuff to give up."

How QBs navigate portal, new teams

Paul Myerberg

USA TODAY

Southern Cal lost a transfer quarterback to Ole Miss, which lost a quarterback to Central Florida, which lost a quarterback to Oklahoma.

Oklahoma gained that quarterback from UCF and another from Pittsburgh but saw second-year star Caleb Williams leave for USC and former starter Spencer Rattler depart for South Carolina. Pittsburgh lost one quarterback to the Sooners but gained another from USC.

Ohio State had a quarterback transfer to Texas, which had a quarterback transfer to Nebraska, which had a quarterback transfer to Kansas State.

Texas A&M lost a quarterback to Auburn but gained another from LSU, which recruited a possible starter from Arizona State, which then pulled in a transfer from Florida.

Factors such as the one-time transfer rule, the blanket extra season of eligibility granted by the coronavirus pandemic and rule changes related to name, image and likeness have created a dizzying game of musical chairs among Football Bowl Subdivision quarterbacks, impacting depth charts, offseason competitions and the race for the College Football Playoff.

"It certainly changed the approach to the quarterback position," said Utah coach Kyle Whittingham. "You can't really worry about it. You can't complain about it or bellyache about it, because it's here to stay. You've got to find a way to make the most of it and get your own individual situation solidified. Oftentimes, that comes through the portal."

While every position has seen similar upheaval, it's at this vital spot that programs have devoted the most brainpower and resources to evaluating, recruiting and eventually preparing transfer quarterbacks in the abbreviated window of time between the end of one season and the start of another.

"I think you can force-feed



Adrian Martinez transferred to Kansas State under rare circumstances. USA JEFF HANISCH/USA TODAY

those guys an awful lot because they want an awful lot so they can try to master all the pieces as they put the whole package together," said Kansas State coach Chris Klieman.

The decision to enter the portal is a roll of the dice for almost any player. By choosing to evaluate his options, a transfer may not be able to return to his original school, should that program and its coaching staff have already decided to move on and pursue his replacement. With far more transfers in the portal than available Power Five scholarships, for example, a player may get caught in scholarship purgatory, unable to return to his previous school or transfer to the school or schools of his choice.

The risk is less prevalent among quarterbacks due to simple supply and demand. Established starters are at a premium. So are developmental

prospects with a high ceiling but no track record of production.

The most common type of quarterback transfer has multiple seasons of remaining eligibility, is transferring from a backup role to chase playing time and is unlikely to contribute heavily in the first year with his new program. On the other end of the spectrum are the highly coveted plug-and-play veterans capable of stepping right into a starting job.

Experienced transfers are "just so much farther along," Penn State coach James Franklin said. "Most of them have obviously played significantly at this level. They understand, whether it's college offenses or defenses. They have a better understanding of the work ethic that it takes at this level. And then usually, most of them, especially if it's a graduate transfer or something like that, they have a sense of urgency."

But with so little room for error and limited scholarship space to work with, coaches will do a deep dive into even the most productive quarterbacks on the transfer market, going back as far as his high school experience to glean insights not visible on the miles of available game tape.

"There's a lot of background that has to be done," said Western Kentucky coach Tyson Helton. "You've got to talk with as many people as you can. Because every coach you can talk to, every person that's involved with that high school or that program or that university, and say, 'OK, tell me about this guy.' You're really just trying to find chinks in the armor. We can find that out pretty quickly."

In some cases, coaches gravitate toward quarterback transfers they recruited years earlier as traditional prospects, drawing on a built-in comfort level

and familiarity that can't be developed on Zoom calls or official visits. In far rarer scenarios, the head coach will have a personal connection with a transfer's former head coach and be given a reliable account of that quarterback's strengths and weaknesses – such as with new Kansas State quarterback Adrian Martinez, thanks to Klieman's relationships with Nebraska coach Scott Frost and former Nebraska quarterbacks coach Mario Verduzco.

In the best-case scenario, programs are able to recruit a transfer quarterback who previously played for the head coach or offensive coordinator. Two of the most impactful transfers of the offseason fit into this category: Williams at USC, where he'll play for former Oklahoma coach Lincoln Riley, and Oklahoma junior Dillon Gabriel, who played under offensive coordinator Jeff Lebby at UCF.

Most often, however, programs evaluating a transfer quarterback will lean on off-the-record conversations within the coaching fraternity, most occurring between lower-level staffers such as graduate assistants or members of the personnel department. Added together, the stream of information coming from every available avenue helps programs unearth the good, the bad, the ugly and everything in between.

"The scrutiny that you look at a quarterback with, I mean, that's the most important position on the field," said Whittingham. "There's no doubt about that. It's so key to your success or lack thereof, that position. So you'd better be right most of the time. You're not going to be right all the time, but you'd better be right most of the time."

For transfer quarterbacks competing for the starting job, the first day on a new campus triggers a condensed period featuring on-field work, hours of one-on-one tutoring with an offensive coordinator or quarterback coach and countless nights reviewing game tape of last year's offense or the



Caleb Williams followed Lincoln Riley from Oklahoma to Southern Cal. KIRBY LEE/USA TODAY SPORTS

previous day's practice.

Technological advancements in how teams can produce, edit and share film have helped shorten the learning curve.

Once signed and enrolled, a transfer quarterback can immediately access via an iPad every piece of tape at his coaches' disposal; the staff can put together an entire library of plays, concepts and cutups as a crash course for how the scheme is designed to operate.

Some programs can provide a remarkable amount of specification, such as every third-down throw by any quarterback or any team, college or NFL, in a given season.

"With the technology that we have nowadays, it makes it a lot easier for these guys to get going," Franklin said.

For transfers being prepped for the starting job, a normal practice during spring drills or fall camp will be followed later in that day by film and accompanying notes from his quarterbacks coach. By the next morning, that quarterback has watched the film, given his own feedback and taken another step toward fully grasping the system.

"He's almost treated as a coach," said Helton. "He's sharing not only our thoughts about him but sharing his thoughts about the whole offense and what needs to be corrected. So it's 24/7. He is living the life of a coach, basically, and that brings him up to speed pretty quickly."

This give and take also leads coaches to look inward at their offense, assessing ways the scheme or system can be tweaked to meet the new quarterback's skill set, experience and overall likes and dislikes.

Teams won't tinker with the hitch in a graduate transfer's quirky throwing motion, for example, accepting that tackling such issues would come at the cost of a most valuable commodity: time. But coaches will spend the spring and summer figuring out what works and what doesn't with a transfer being prepared for the starting job, ultimately landing on what is at least a partially re-imagined playbook and overall vision for the offense.

"You'd be shortchanging yourself, the young man and the program if you didn't ask what he likes," said Klieman. "That's what good coaches do, good programs, good organizations

do. You find out what skill set an individual has and you try to enhance those skills."

If done correctly, this offseason cram session can get a quarterback and his new program on the same page before kickoff, achieving in months what was once a multiple-year process – the multiple stages of development from arriving on campus, learning the system and then ascending to the starting job.

It has also helped even the playing field. The top teams in the country can no longer stockpile years of depth under center, spreading talent across the FBS and giving every program the chance to find the right fit at the most important spot on the field.

"The one great thing about our game is that recruiting is not an exact science, especially at the quarterback position," Helton said. "It doesn't matter where you come from, how you were rated, you see year after year these quarterbacks who become big-time names that really not a lot of people thought a lot of two or three years ago, you know."

"That's what gives everybody a chance to be part of the national conversation."

TRANSFER PORTAL WINNERS

Alabama

Cornerback Eli Ricks (LSU) is one of the top defensive backs in the country and a possible starter, should he recover from shoulder surgery and stay out of coach Nick Saban's doghouse after an arrest May 1 on charges of speeding, driving without insurance and possession of marijuana; the latter charge was dismissed June 23. Running back Jahmyr Gibbs (Georgia Tech) is a do-everything skill talent with All-American potential. At worst, offensive tackle Tyler Steen (Vanderbilt) will be a key backup at several spots. Wide receiver Jermaine Burton (Georgia) brings along proven SEC production with the benefit of taking production away from Alabama's cross-division rival. And fellow receiver Tyler Harrell (Louisville) gives the Tide and quarterback Bryce Young a major home-run threat.



Jermaine Burton will now catch passes for Alabama.

SAM NAVARRO/USA TODAY SPORTS

(Georgia Tech) and Khari Coleman (TCU), inked another productive running back in Ulysses Bentley (SMU) and upgraded at tight end with Michael Trigg (Southern Cal).

Nebraska

The Cornhuskers' odds in this make-or-break year for coach Scott Frost look much better with the additions of quarterback Casey Thompson (Texas), edge rusher Ochaun Mathis (TCU), cornerback Tommi Hill (Arizona State) and wide receiver Tre Palmer (LSU). Nebraska should also improve on special teams by adding punter Brian Buschini (Montana).

South Carolina

Bringing in quarterback Spencer Rattler (Oklahoma), a heavy Heisman favorite before struggling through a disappointing 2021 season, dramatically changes the outlook for South Carolina's offense. That's not all: The Gamecocks' offensive rebuild also includes running backs Christian Beal-Smith (Wake Forest) and Lovasea Carroll (Georgia) and receiver Antwane Wells (James Madison).

– Paul Myerberg

Southern California

The cream of the crop is quarterback Caleb Williams, who followed coach Lincoln Riley from Oklahoma. Another OU grab, receiver Mario Williams, will snag a role along the top line of the rotation. Riley and the Trojans also loaded up on players capable of stepping into the starting lineup, including running back Travis Dye (Oregon) and cornerback Mekhi Blackmon (Colorado), while adding depth to a roster in need of dependable bodies.

Ole Miss

Running back Zach Evans (TCU) averaged 7.3 yards per carry in two seasons in the Big 12. Lane Kiffin also added quarterback Jaxson Dart (Southern Cal), the favorite in the two-man competition to replace Matt Corral in Kiffin's QB-friendly scheme. The Rebels also improved the pass rush by adding Jared Ivey

COMING SOON

fewer plays, shorter games, and lots of disagreement

Possible changes to college football include running the clock after first downs and after incomplete passes

Paul Myerberg
USA TODAY

The Baltimore Ravens ran an NFL-high 1,185 plays in 2021 for an average of 69.7 snaps per game across the 17-game regular season.

Last season's Football Bowl Subdivision runner-up Alabama left the Ravens in the dust: 1,119 plays in 15 games, or an average of 74.6 offensive plays per game. Another 60 FBS teams exceeded Baltimore's per-game average, including half of the Southeastern Conference.

At last year's FBS-wide rate of 68.2 plays per game, a college team playing 17 games would face substantially more plays per season than an NFL counterpart. Professional teams averaged 63.3 plays per game in 2021, which amounts to a difference of roughly 83 plays over the course of a 17-game season — meaning FBS players would essentially be subjected to the wear and tear of one additional game per year.

With postseason expansion on the horizon, college football's broader focus on player health and safety has zeroed in on the number of plays teams face over the course of a season — also referred to as “exposures,” representing the number of times an individual player could be exposed to potential harm during the regular season and postseason.

Following the handful of safety-related changes to game play itself, such as recent modifications to kickoff rules, the FBS may in the very near future attack health and safety concerns at the source: by cutting down on the number of plays

per individual game and across an entire season.

“If you're going to increase the number of games in a college season, you've got to figure out some changes where we can decrease the number of plays,” said Arkansas athletic director Hunter Yurachek, a member of the Division I Football Oversight Committee. “We don't need student-athletes, young men out there playing 80, 90, 100 plays a game because of the high-powered offenses in the college game.”

If adopted, measures related to lowering the number of exposures per game and per season could dramatically alter the way the sport is played on the college level. As of this spring and summer, conferences and various committees are weighing three central issues:

- Why it should be done.
- How it could be done.
- And whether it can be achieved while maintaining the uniqueness that has long separated the college game from the style of play in the NFL.

“Everyone is worried about player safety, especially with the number of athletes that everybody has to work with,” said Kansas State coach Chris Klieman.

Teams in the FBS averaged 71.3 plays per game in 1971 and reached a high of 72 plays per game in 2014, only once in this half-century period of widespread offensive evolution dipping below an average of 67.7.

What has changed in this span, however, is the number of games played across a season, and thus the total number of plays each team will face during a given year.

During the 2021 season, 75

teams, well above half of the FBS, played more than 12 games; only one team played more than 12 games in 1981 and just five in 1991.

Twenty teams played more than 13 games. Two teams, the Crimson Tide and Georgia, played 15 games.

The topic has become even more time-sensitive given the strong possibility of additional games coming to the postseason calendar.

While overly optimistic College Football Playoff expansion talks disintegrated this winter, keeping the current four-team format in place for the next four years, the playoff is expected to grow to an eight- or 12-team bracket in 2026. In the case of a 12-team field, multiple teams could play 16 or even 17 games in a season.

“I think we could've expanded the College Football Playoff and then used the next two years to come to a really effective conclusion,” said SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey. “Others didn't see it that way.”

“What I hope we don't do is lose focus on continuing to think about how we update the game in a healthy way.”

How could college football games be shortened?

Even as FBS conferences and administrators struggle to find common ground in the playoff conversation, steps to increase the speed of games and decrease the number of exposures have coalesced around two measures.

- Running the clock after first downs. College football has long differentiated itself from the NFL by stopping the clock



Stopping the clock after an incomplete pass is a “relic of the game,” according to SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey.

ANDREW NELLES/THE TENNESSEAN

after each first down. Under existing rules, “the game clock is stopped on an official's signal” with each new set of downs, according to the FBS rulebook, with the clock restarting on the ensuing snap or the referee's signal.

“Some things like that will help speed up the game, reduce the number of total plays, and I think that's better for the student-athletes,” Yurachek said.

With FBS teams averaging 20.8 first downs per game in 2021, this move could trim minutes off the clock with a commensurate drop in the number of overall snaps.

“If you just kept the clock running after first downs, you'd eliminate 8-10 plays,” Klieman said. “That would be one way that you could shorten the game a little bit.”

- Running the clock after incomplete passes. While the clock would not continue to run after an incompleteness, as it does on a running play, the FBS could

adopt a change that would restart the clock before the ensuing snap on the referee's signal.

Stopping the clock with an incomplete pass is “a relic of the game, really,” said Sankey.

FBS teams averaged 396.1 attempts in 2021, or an average of 31.1 passes per game, and completed 60.9% of those attempts.

“Some of these issues in our game are intertwined together,” said Steve Shaw, the NCAA national coordinator of officials. “Certainly the pace and the tempo in our game is an issue. Can teams substitute, can they not? How does that impact, you know, the player health and safety? So I think as we put this data together, it's not only just a play count, look at your watch and how long did that game take, but what are the circumstances?”

While these suggestions are a topic of conversation across multiple key blocs — including individual Power Five conferences, the Oversight Commit-

tee, the NCAA Football Rules Committee and the American Football Coaches Association – the possibility of such drastic changes to the sport have triggered an equally monumental question in response: Are there ways to tweak game play while still protecting the unique nature of college football?

Compared to the more staid nature of NFL game play, college football is a kaleidoscope of quirky and offbeat offensive schemes designed in part to lessen the talent gap between opposing teams.

Even as most teams have embraced an up-tempo style, there is variety even among the nation's busiest offenses: Oklahoma State ranked fourth nationally in total plays last season (1,068) but ran the ball 58.1% of the time; Western Kentucky ranked seventh in offensive snaps (1,046) but threw the ball on 66.7% of plays.

Cutting down on plays per game may not lead to an NFL-like homogeneity in offensive style across the FBS. Still, steps taken to manage the number of overall plays per season could change the way college football is played and possibly signal the end of the sport's ongoing offensive revolution.

"The NFL does really well," Sankey said. "They're averaging about three hours per game. But that game is played in a different manner. You don't see the type of creativity. I don't mean that pejoratively. But in offenses, spread, hurry-ups, like you do in college."

Speeding up game won't be embraced by all coaches

Efforts to alter longstanding game play rules could find another impediment among coaches, with clear lines drawn between those favoring speedy, play-heavy designs and those adhering to a more traditional approach to offense and defense.

That makes it unlikely that any rule changes would be palatable to the entire swath of the FBS; instead, any colossal updates to the longstanding model could be embraced and despised in almost equal measure.

"What we decide to do is nev-



In examining ways college football games could be shortened, running the clock after first downs and incomplete passes could be considered. ELAINE THOMPSON/AP

er going to be 100% popular across the country," said Stanford coach and rules committee chair David Shaw. "There is a push-pull, typically between offense and defense, between spread and non-spread, between up-tempo and those that are on the defense trying to defend up-tempo. I don't think that's going to change. It hasn't changed for years."

The makeup of teams in the SEC illustrates this push and pull. While the conference has been proactive in evaluating ways to limit exposures, including by contracting external re-

search firms and coordinating conversations with the league's student-athlete advisory committee, game play in the SEC includes multiple up-tempo schemes – pass-happy at Mississippi State, balanced at Alabama, more run-focused at Ole Miss – in addition to the more conventional styles used by Kentucky, Texas A&M and others.

But the league's reinvention from the defense-first mode that defined the FBS in the 2000s and first half of the 2010s has helped the SEC remain an unstoppable juggernaut during

the playoff era.

If the league is uncomfortable with giving back any edge provided by this combination of cutting-edge schemes and unmatched talent, could the FBS really move forward with sweeping changes to game play – even if those changes are made in the vein of improving player health and safety?

"What I would encourage is we respect the ability" for different offenses, said Sankey. "We want the creativity."

"I like the creativity between Mike Leach and Lane Kiffin and Josh Heupel, and the traditional

approach that's part of other offenses.

"Or the middle ground, the ability to do things differently."

The conversations afoot this offseason will attempt to thread the needle on the dominant on-field topic of the day.

"We love this game," said David Shaw, the coach and rules committee chair. "The people who play it love playing it. There is an obvious risk element to it. As much as we can make it as safe as possible and as common sense as possible, that's what we try to do on the rules committee."

Georgia believes in winning standard

Marc Weiszer

Athens (Ga.) Banner-Herald

Recruits on visits to Georgia this spring saw firsthand the results of donors pouring more than \$100 million into facility upgrades in recent years, including a glistening football operations center, a much-needed indoor practice facility and a new game-day locker room.

They also posed with something the program earned last season: the college football national championship trophy.

After ending a 41-year national title drought behind a generational defense and an underrated offense with former walk-on Stetson Bennett at quarterback, will the incoming recruiting classes add more hardware during their time in Athens?

Or will Georgia slide back like an LSU team that won the national title just two seasons earlier?

Coach Kirby Smart doesn't see his program as a "flash in the pan," he told fans this offseason when talking about the program maintaining a level of excellence.

"I think we've been there," he said at an event in Duluth, Georgia, in April. "It's not like this is the first time we've been in the conversation. I'm all for consistency. We've consistently performed and been consistent in recruiting and been consistent on the field."

Georgia has finished in the top seven each of the last five seasons in The Associated Press poll, something only Ohio State has done. Georgia is tied with Clemson for second-most national championship game appearances since the 2017 season with two, behind Alabama's four.

"You have to stay in that conversation," said Smart, who won the national title in his sixth Georgia season and second College Football Playoff championship game.

"Now, this will be the most talent as a whole we've lost at once, but every year we lose

juniors who are really good players. ... The challenge as coaches is to make sure we bring in enough talent to replace those. We are also developing."

Georgia lost 15 draft picks (an NFL modern-day record) including a record five first-round picks off the defense.

Talent still oozes all over the roster and the Bulldogs return Bennett for a sixth college season after he did what critics thought he couldn't by leading the team to a national title.

"I'm a self motivator I guess," he said. "I want to win every single time, so that doesn't change anything as far as what we want to accomplish this year."

Bennett and the other returning players including breakout tight end Brock Bowers and projected NFL first-round defensive tackle Jalen Carter will be joined by newcomers from a recruiting class ranked No. 3 in the nation by the 247Sports Composite, a sixth straight top-3 class under Smart.

Georgia has a look of a program built to last like Alabama — the program Smart helped build as defensive coordinator under Nick Saban and one the Bulldogs finally knocked off 33-18 in the national championship game — more than a one-hit wonder like Ed Orgeron's Tigers turned out to be.

LSU went from preseason No. 6 in 2020 to unranked at the end of that season.

The magic spun by quarterback Joe Burrow and an explosive offense with passing game coordinator Joe Brady disappeared. After going 9-8 in the 17 games after LSU's national title, Orgeron was fired in October of last season.

"It's probably apples and oranges," LSU athletic director Scott Woodward said in early June at the Southeastern Conference spring meetings. "Two different people. I know Kirby well and obviously I know Coach O well. Two different situations, two different things."

Woodward, who returned to his alma mater before the 2019 season and was the school's di-



Stetson Bennett has passed for more than 4,300 yards at Georgia and returns as a national champion. DALE ZANINE/USA TODAY SPORTS

rector of external affairs when Smart was a Tigers assistant in 2004, said he would be surprised if Georgia takes a downturn under Smart. Woodward made a splashy hire in luring Brian Kelly from Notre Dame to Baton Rouge to coach the Tigers, but he couldn't pinpoint what went wrong after the 2019 national title.

There are several possible factors: a sense of complacency, staff departures including defensive coordinator Dave Aranda and Orgeron's handling of sexual misconduct allegations against a player.

"There were a lot of factors, and if I knew the answer, I would be a Nobel Prize winner," Woodward said. "I just don't know. You don't know what happens. The secret ingredients and the magic was right in 2019.

That's something they'll never take away from O and it was right. What happened after that? I kind of wish I knew. I really do. I wasn't expecting it."

Smart liked how the 2022 Bulldogs have handled the months that followed a moment that the Bulldog fan base had waited decades to come.

"The pats on the back, the kids get them, everywhere you go, every time you go out in your communities, you get that, you use that for energy but that story was last year," said Smart, the former All-SEC safety at Georgia. "A lot of those guys are no longer part of this team. You've got a group of young men who were a part of the team, and I'm extremely excited about going out and playing football games with them."

"Everybody thinks you have

to be a certain age to be a performer on the football field, but if you are talented enough ... we've got some talented guys, we just don't have a lot of experience. They've bought in, they've done a tremendous job in the offseason."

Smart's team may be the reigning national champions, but he's already pushed back on any notion that Georgia is the defending national champions.

"That was never our end all and be all last year," Smart said at an event at the Augusta Boys & Girls Club in April. "That team last year, they wanted to destroy everybody that they played."

"They never talked about a national championship. That's easy for the fan base to say I want to win a national championship. Our goal was to go out and annihilate, make your opponent quit, make them never want to play you again."

Smart tells the story of two players wanting to address the team after the Missouri game because they weren't happy with the effort shown.

That came after a 43-6 rout. The players wanted the entire team to show up for an optional Sunday lifting session.

"It's so much work that went into that season, that national championship," said Jamaree Salyer, Georgia's starting left tackle the past two seasons who was a sixth-round draft pick by the Los Angeles Chargers in April. "It didn't just happen. Everybody likes to put it on the talent, but it was so much work. I hope those guys never undervalue what that work meant to this team or the leadership that went into it. We won the national championship but I think about all the hard days we put into it in practices and meetings and walk-throughs."

Said Minnesota Vikings first-round safety Lewis Cine, a starter on the national title team: "I think Georgia has a great blueprint going forward. They had a great recruiting class. Kirby knows what it takes. He's just going to do the same thing that led up to winning the natty."

Pack turn bad taste into big designs

David Thompson

The Fayetteville (N.C.) Observer

RALEIGH, N.C. — Dave Doeren's facial hair is more than just a new look.

For North Carolina State's football coach — now entering his 10th season with a contract extension that could keep him in Raleigh until 2026 — the salt and peppered beard is a daily reminder of last season's controversial end.

The Wolfpack were set to face UCLA in the Dec. 28 Holiday Bowl with a chance to win their 10th game for only the second time in program history before the Bruins pulled out hours before kickoff due to COVID-19 issues within the program.

Doeren told reporters later that day he "felt lied to" and said UCLA was deceptive when it came to the health of its players. The NCAA later ruled the game a no-contest, leaving N.C. State with nine wins and prompting Doeren to give college sports' governing body a new acronym.

"The NCAA stands for No Clue At All in my opinion," Doeren said in December.

Six months later that anger remains.

"When I started it (growing the beard), it was just my protest of how our season ended," Doeren told the USA TODAY Network. "I was pissed off at the world when all that stuff happened."

It's the perfect narrative for Doeren to adopt as the Wolfpack enter the 2022 season with the highest expectations of any team over the last decade. It's a program that thrives as an underdog but has struggled as a favorite, a place the Wolfpack find themselves this year.

"There is a lot of unfinished business," Doeren said in May. "There has been a huge chip on our shoulder because we didn't get to the Charlotte game last year."

Doeren, 50, is on his way to becoming the program's all-time winningest coach and is the only one to lead the Wolfpack to three separate nine-win



N.C. State coach Dave Doeren has a new beard that serves as a daily reminder of last season's controversial end, and perhaps the promise of what lies ahead. CHRIS SEWARD/AP

seasons, including finishing 18th in the final College Football Playoff rankings and 19th in the final USA TODAY Sports AFCA Coaches Poll last season.

But the game's biggest accomplishments have remained out of reach. N.C. State has never played in an Atlantic Coast Conference title game — the league began playing a championship game in 2005 — and close losses to Miami (31-30) and Wake Forest (45-42) kept that streak alive in 2021.

This season, though, the Wolfpack are trendy picks to win the ACC's Atlantic Division after defeating Clemson, Florida State and North Carolina last season for the first time in 20 years. There is a certain level of trepidation with the preseason hype, especially after watching UNC stumble and fall last year after entering the season as a national title hopeful.

But N.C. State has the foundation for success.

All 10 on-field assistant coaches return with new contract agreements as well as the majority of the starters from last year's 9-3 campaign.

The excitement begins with returning quarterback Devin Leary, who Doeren has called the "best quarterback in the country" during several offseason interviews.

Leary returns for his fourth year in Raleigh after quieting his detractors with a breakout season in 2021.

Coming off a broken leg in 2020, Leary became one of the nation's most efficient passers with 3,433 yards, 35 touchdowns and only five interceptions while completing 65% of his throws.

This season, Leary's blind side will be more vulnerable with left tackle Ikem Ekwonu turning pro. The 6-6, 330-pound Anthony Belton, Ekwonu's backup last season, got the start at left tackle during the spring

game and senior Bryson Spears and sophomore Timothy McKay could also be used at the position.

"There are a lot of guys here that are excited for their opportunity to compete," Doeren said. "By the time we get to August, we'll have a real good feel for where we're at."

The return of offensive lineman Chandler Zavala will provide a boost after the NCAA granted him a sixth year of eligibility. His initial application for a sixth season of eligibility based on injuries and a year lost due to COVID-19 was initially denied.

"I'm just so excited to have a chance to play another year with my brothers," Zavala told the USA TODAY Network. "We've got a chance to do something special."

Leary will have some familiar targets at wide receiver with Thayer Thomas and Devin Carter. Thomas caught 51 passes for

596 yards and eight touchdowns last year, and the 6-3 Carter is primed for an encore after 31 receptions for 556 yards and six touchdowns. Maryland transfer Darryl Jones could also make an early impact for the Wolfpack.

The biggest question mark on offense is who will run the ball. Zonovan Knight and Ricky Person are both gone to the NFL, leaving N.C. State without a proven running back.

Junior Jordan Houston is the most experienced and the obvious candidate to be the starting running back. In 2021, Houston had a career-low 20 carries for 83 yards. He tore a ligament in his foot during the spring game that limited his abilities at the beginning of the season. In his first two seasons, he had double-digit catches. In 2021, he had three.

Sophomore Delbert Mimms and freshman Demie Sumo-Karnghaye have six career carries between the two and Michael Allen, N.C. State's four-star running back from the class of 2022, hasn't played a down of college football.

"Those young guys, Delbert, Demie, they are really good," Houston said. "But I'm now the oldest guy in the room, so I think just naturally, it's for the best if I step up and be a leader in that room. I mean, this is what I've been waiting for."

N.C. State lost six starters on defense last year, including All-ACC linebacker Payton Wilson and Isaiah Moore, and still only allowed 19.7 points per game. The Pack's defense finished among the best in every major defensive category.

Wilson and Moore return this season along with Drake Thomas, who stepped into the middle linebacker position to have 99 tackles, 13.5 tackles for a loss, six sacks, three interceptions and nine quarterback hurries. They'll also return All-ACC defensive tackle Cory Durden, cornerback Derrek Pitts Jr., safety Tanner Ingle and nickel Tyler Baker-Williams thanks to the extra COVID-19 year.

COACHES ON HOT SEAT

These 10 fail to live up to team expectations

Scooby Axson

USA TODAY

Every spring, new coaches, whether they were fired and got another job or left for greener pastures, attempt to ingratiate themselves to fan bases.

The men on this list don't have that luxury because they have fallen out of favor at their schools because of consistent losing or failure to meet expectations.

Steve Sarkisian, Texas

The Longhorns disappoint every season. But they finally hit rock bottom after a 5-7 mark in 2021, which included an overtime loss to Kansas. Armed with a top-notch recruiting class and with transfer Quinn Ewers in the fold, as well as QB Arch Manning coming in 2023, there are no excuses for Sarkisian. Now that Lincoln Riley took his Oklahoma act out West, things may finally be looking up in Austin. This season's measuring stick will come swiftly when Alabama pays a visit on Sept. 10.

Scott Frost, Nebraska

Most coaches who have a losing record in four seasons at a once-proud university would have been gone, but for some reason, Frost is allowed to coach with a 15-29 record with the Cornhuskers coming into 2022. It's obviously a now-or-never season for Frost and he made wholesale changes, including getting rid of nearly the entire offensive coaching staff. He will have experience at the quarterback position in Texas transfer Casey Thompson, who led the Big 12 in touchdown passes, and Chubba Purdy, who saw minimum action with Florida State.

David Shaw, Stanford

He is a good coach, the winningest in the program's history. He knows it is tough to recruit at a place like Stanford and no one feels sorry for him. Shaw was



Steve Sarkisian went 5-7 in his first season at Texas, dropping six of his last seven games. STEPHEN SPILLMAN/USA TODAY SPORTS

used to getting the Cardinal to double-digit victories on an annual basis, something he hasn't done since 2016. Last year's team failed miserably in areas that used to be strengths: running the ball and stopping the run. The Cardinal were among the worst in the nation at both. Maybe the administration gives Shaw a reprieve, but losing, no matter where, won't be tolerated for long.

Mike Norvell, Florida State

It's possible Florida State will return to national prominence sooner rather than later.

It's also possible that Norvell is not the coach to take them there. Losing to Jacksonville State of the Football Championship Subdivision in 2021 doesn't help. It has been a continuing rotisserie of coaches since Bobby Bowden left the sideline and Jimbo Fisher told Texas A&M he would be more than happy to take \$75 million. Less than a decade ago, the Seminoles were one of the most talented teams in the nation. Now, Norvell is fighting an uphill battle with recruits to stay amid a culture of undisciplined and erratic play on the field and not much buzz around the program.

Herman Edwards, Arizona State

Besides middling results on the field, Edwards is facing an NCAA investigation for alleged recruiting violations. His starting quarterback the past three years, Jayden Daniels, transferred to LSU. Edwards will also be without four assistants, including offensive coordinator Zac Hill, who resigned amid the investigation. Two other assistants were fired, accused of hosting recruits on campus during a COVID-19 dead period. The point may be moot by the time October rolls around as the Sun Devils face Oklahoma State, Utah, Southern Cal and Washington in the first month.

Scott Satterfield, Louisville

In 2019, Louisville won eight games and Satterfield was named Atlantic Coast Conference Coach of the Year. Back-to-back seven-loss seasons shredded any momentum, and courting the South Carolina job after his second year also soured the fan base. As with most of the coaches on this list, it's about recruiting and developing talent. The 2023 class is ranked in the top 10 nationally, so surviving another year would be helpful.

Dino Babers, Syracuse

After his fifth losing campaign in six seasons came a mandate from athletic director John Wildhack to win more games. That probably means a bowl game invite at a minimum, and that accomplishment still may not save Babers.

Geoff Collins, Georgia Tech

The stats don't lie if someone wanted to make a case for Collins not being the coach in 2023. Nine wins in three years, near the bottom in the ACC in total offense and total defense in 2021 (the defense intercepted three passes) plus more than a dozen players hit the transfer

portal after another dismal season. Collins' problem may be two-fold: recruiting and at least getting some talent that doesn't commit to Georgia to play for Tech and the overall philosophy. If Paul Johnson can win a conference title with the triple option, then Collins really has no excuses for anything short of a bowl bid.

Karl Dorrell, Colorado

Maybe Mel Tucker saw the writing on the wall because after one season at Colorado he jumped ship to Michigan State, leaving Dorrell to fend for himself with a roster that surprised in 2020 but just wasn't good enough to compete in the Pac-12 South Division last year. The problem with the Buffaloes was injuries and generating anything that looked like a competent offense. They scored 20 points or less in 10 of their 12 games and were non-competitive when they traveled. Most administrations want to see progress from year to year, and if that doesn't happen this season, it'd be hard to justify bringing Dorrell back for a fourth.

Bryan Harsin, Auburn

Where to begin? If your program had a plethora of transfers during the offseason, assistant coaches itching to leave just as fast and a near overthrow of the head coach, after he was accused of mistreating his players and staff, that coaching seat would be more than tepid. Harsin denied those allegations, but nearly two dozen players and five assistants left after his first season. The university investigated and decided to keep him for at least one more year. If the Tigers don't at least make the Southeastern Conference championship game (highly unlikely at this point), the powers that be at Auburn have no problem reaching into their pocketbooks to tell anyone underperforming with almost impossible expectations to exit stage left.

RANKING THE FBS

Rk	School	W	L
1	Alabama	13	2
2	Ohio State	11	2
3	Georgia	14	1
4	Michigan	12	2
5	Oklahoma	11	2
6	Clemson	10	3
7	Utah	10	4
8	Texas A&M	8	4
9	North Carolina State	9	3
10	BYU	10	3
11	Iowa	10	4
12	Penn State	7	6
13	Wake Forest	11	3
14	Notre Dame	11	2
15	Baylor	12	2
16	Pittsburgh	11	3
17	Oregon	10	4
18	Wisconsin	9	4
19	Oklahoma State	12	2
20	UCLA	8	4
21	Kentucky	10	3
22	Coastal Carolina	11	2
23	North Carolina	6	7
24	Arkansas	9	4
25	Kansas State	8	5
26	Houston	12	2
27	Boise State	7	5
28	Michigan State	11	2
29	Fresno State	10	3
30	Appalachian State	10	4
31	Ole Miss	10	3
32	Army	9	4
33	Minnesota	9	4
34	Tennessee	7	6
35	Texas	5	7
36	Air Force	10	3
37	LSU	6	7
38	Cincinnati	13	1
39	Miami (Fla.)	7	5
40	Central Florida	9	4
41	Alabama Birmingham	9	4
42	Louisiana Lafayette	13	1
43	Texas-San Antonio	12	2
44	San Diego State	12	2
45	Florida State	5	7
46	Mississippi State	7	6
47	Stanford	3	9
48	Nebraska	3	9
49	Virginia	6	6
50	Toledo	7	6
51	Southern Cal	4	8
52	Iowa State	7	6
53	Washington	4	8
54	Northern Illinois	9	5
55	Florida	6	7
56	Texas Tech	7	6
57	Purdue	9	4
58	East Carolina	7	5
59	Kent State	7	7
60	SMU	8	4
61	Auburn	6	7
62	Virginia Tech	6	7
63	Louisville	6	7



Riley Moss, who returns for a fifth season at Iowa, is always a threat to make a big interception. JOSEPH CRESS/IOWA CITY PRESS-CITIZEN

64	Utah State	11	3	86	Liberty	8	5	108	Arizona	1	11	117	Temple	3	9	126	Akron	2	10
65	Missouri	6	7	87	Georgia State	8	5	109	Charlotte	5	7	118	Vanderbilt	2	10	127	New Mexico	3	9
66	Boston College	6	6	88	Arizona State	8	5	110	Texas-El Paso	7	6	119	Hawaii	6	7	128	Florida International	1	11
67	TCU	5	7	89	Texas State	4	8	111	Troy	5	7	120	Ohio	3	9	129	Massachusetts	1	11
68	South Carolina	7	6	90	Eastern Michigan	7	6	112	Louisiana Monroe	4	8	121	Louisiana Tech	3	9	130	New Mexico State	2	10
69	Rutgers	5	8	91	Memphis	6	6	113	Colorado	4	8	122	Bowling Green	4	8	131	Connecticut	1	11
70	Middle Tennessee State	7	6	92	Tulsa	7	6	114	Colorado State	3	9	123	Rice	4	8	*James Madison played in the Football Championship Subdivision last season			
71	Central Michigan	9	4	93	Illinois	5	7	115	Duke	3	9	124	Buffalo	4	8				
72	West Virginia	6	7	94	Old Dominion	6	7	116	Arkansas State	2	10	125	UNLV	2	10				
73	Maryland	7	6	95	Washington State	7	6												
74	Marshall	7	6	96	South Florida	2	10												
75	Western Michigan	8	5	97	Indiana	2	10												
76	Nevada	8	5	98	Syracuse	5	7												
77	Oregon State	7	6	99	James Madison*	12	2												
78	Tulane	2	10	100	South Alabama	5	7												
79	Miami (Ohio)	7	6	101	North Texas	6	7												
80	Navy	4	8	102	Ball State	6	7												
81	Northwestern	3	9	103	Southern Mississippi	3	9												
82	California	5	7	104	Kansas	2	10												
83	Wyoming	7	6	105	Georgia Southern	3	9												
84	Western Kentucky	9	5	106	Georgia Tech	3	9												
85	San Jose State	5	7	107	Florida Atlantic	5	7												

COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF PREDICTIONS

Writer	Teams	Championship game	Winner
Eddie Timanus	Alabama, Ohio State, Georgia, Oklahoma	Ohio State, Alabama	Ohio State
Erick Smith	Alabama, Oklahoma, Ohio State, Georgia	Alabama, Ohio State	Alabama
Paul Myerberg	Alabama, Ohio State, Georgia, N.C. State	Alabama, Ohio State	Alabama
Heather Tucker	Alabama, Notre Dame, Ohio State, Baylor	Alabama, Ohio State	Alabama
Jace Evans	Alabama, Ohio State, Georgia, Clemson	Alabama, Ohio State	Alabama
Dan Wolken	Alabama, Notre Dame, Baylor, Ohio State	Alabama, Notre Dame	Alabama

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Heather Tucker	Alabama, Notre Dame, Ohio State, Baylor	Alabama, Ohio State	Alabama
Jace Evans	Alabama, Ohio State, Georgia, Clemson	Alabama, Ohio State	Alabama
Dan Wolken	Alabama, Notre Dame, Baylor, Ohio State	Alabama, Notre Dame	Alabama

#1

Location: Tuscaloosa, Alabama
Stadium: Bryant-Denny Stadium (1929)
Website: rolltide.com
Head coach: Nick Saban, 16th season (178-25)

Alabama Crimson Tide

The situation: The 2020 version of the Crimson Tide set a standard that was admittedly almost impossible to match. Even so, the 2021 version still put up eye-popping numbers, overcame a midseason setback at Texas A&M – as well as a few other close calls – to win the SEC title, and had a shot at another national championship. The rematch with Georgia didn’t go the Tide’s way – losing standout WR Jameson Williams to a first-half knee injury didn’t help. But expect the Tide to be back on the big stage.

The reigning Heisman Trophy holder and arguably the best defensive player in the country will be back in Tuscaloosa in 2022. We’ll begin on the offensive side, where QB Bryce Young will look to build on his impressive list of accolades before likely heading off to the NFL. His heir apparent is Jalen Milroe, a talented dual threat who could see the field in some situations this year. Young will be working with some new pass catchers with Williams and John Metchie III gone, but dependable TE Cameron Latu is back. Incoming transfers Jermaine Burton from Georgia and Tyler Harrell from Louisville look to follow the trail blazed last year by Williams, who also arrived via the portal, from Ohio State. Christian Leary and Ja’Corey Brooks will also be in the receiver rotation. There are experienced hands in the running back room like Jase McClellan, Trey Sanders and Roydell Williams. But it was another transfer, Jahmyr Gibbs arriving from Georgia Tech, who impressed the most in the spring and will likely fill the shoes of Brian Robinson.

The star of the defense will again be Will Anderson, a devastating edge rusher who recorded 33.5 tackles for loss and 17.5 sacks in 2021. The outside LB group also includes Dallas Turner and Chris Braswell, and Henry To’oTo’o is back to anchor the inside after leading the Tide with 112 total tackles last year. Safeties Jordan Battle and DeMarcco Hellams will provide stability in the secondary that will be tested by SEC attacks.

The schedule: While the opener

2021 IN REVIEW

Overall: 13-2
Conference: 8-1
Bowl: Lost to Georgia 33-18 in College Football Playoff Championship

Stats and leaders

Points scored: 39.9
Total offense: 488.2
Rushing: 150.0
Passing: 338.2
Points allowed: 20.1
Total defense: 304.1
Run defense: 86.0
Pass defense: 218.1

PASSING	YDS	PCT.	TD	INT
Young	4,872	66.9	47	7
RUSHING	ATT	YDS	AVG	TD
Robinson	271	1,343	4.96	13
Sanders	72	314	4.36	2
Roydell Williams	48	284	5.92	1
RECEIVING	REC	YDS	AVG	TD
Jameson Williams	79	1,572	19.90	15
Metchie	96	1,142	11.90	8
Latu	26	410	15.77	8

2022 schedule

S. 3 vs. Utah State
S. 10 at Texas
S. 17 vs. Louisiana-Monroe
S. 24 vs. Vanderbilt
O. 1 at Arkansas
O. 8 vs. Texas A&M
O. 15 at Tennessee
O. 22 vs. Mississippi State
N. 5 at LSU
N. 12 at Mississippi
N. 19 vs. Austin Peay
N. 26 vs. Auburn

TOP 10 TEAM PREVIEWS WRITTEN BY EDDIE TIMANUS



Alabama TE Cameron Latu plays Georgia during the College Football Playoff National Championship. USA TODAY NETWORK

against Utah State won’t be a complete cakewalk, the first true test of the season should come a week later against Texas. October includes potential stumbling blocks at Arkansas and Tennessee, but of course that Oct. 8 home date with Texas A&M will generate just a wee bit of hype. Things don’t get much easier in November, which kicks off with visits to LSU and Mississippi.

Why this is a Top 10 team: No, the Crimson Tide don’t win every national championship, but they’re in the hunt for one on an annual basis. That doesn’t figure to change this year.

Converting on third down was just one of the many things the Tide offense did well in 2021. The unit’s success rate of 52.02% was good for third in the country, behind Coastal Carolina and Ohio State.

52.02
KEY NUMBER

#2

Ohio State Buckeyes

The situation: At just about any other program, a double-digit victory season culminating in a Rose Bowl win would be viewed as a smashing success. Not so long ago, that would have been the case at Ohio State. But in the playoff era, a season without a Big Ten crown that instead went to the hated rival left Buckeyes fans even crankier than usual. Ohio State will be seen as the league favorite given all the talent back in Columbus.

The Buckeyes led the nation in scoring in 2021, and the attack's triggerman, QB C.J. Stroud, will be on most Heisman watch lists entering his sophomore campaign. The only downside to his stellar season was that touted recruit Quin Ewers saw the writing on the wall and transferred to Texas, making Kyle McCord the likely backup option. The receiving corps should still be among the best in the country, even with the loss of next-level talents like Chris Olave and Garrett Wilson. Jaxon Smith-Njigba, who actually caught more balls than anyone last season, returns and should again be a primary target from the slot position. Outside threats moving up the depth chart will include Marvin Harrison Jr., whose father you've no doubt heard of, and Julian Fleming if he can finally stay healthy. Master Teague III has moved on, but the backfield will be in good hands with rushing leader TreVeyon Henderson and backup Miyan Williams returning. The coaching staff was largely pleased with its personnel on the interior line following spring drills, but NFL-bound LT Thayer Munford will be missed.

But coach Ryan Day was well aware that the other side of the ball needed attention, and to that end he hired defensive coordinator Jim Knowles away from Oklahoma State. Knowles' preferred 4-2-5 scheme should take advantage of the Buckeyes' talent in the secondary, which figures to be the strength of the unit this fall. FS Ronnie Hickman and CBs Denzel Burke and Cameron Brown will anchor the back end, with incumbent LBs Tommy Eichenburg and Steele Chambers holding down the second level.

Location: Columbus, Ohio
Stadium: Ohio Stadium (1922)
Website: ohiostatebuckeyes.com
Head coach: Ryan Day, fourth full season (34-4)

2022 IN REVIEW

Overall: 11-2
Conference: 8-1
Bowl: Beat Utah 48-45 in the Rose Bowl

Stats and leaders

Points scored: 45.7
Total offense: 561.2
Rushing: 180.3
Passing: 380.9
Points allowed: 22.8
Total defense: 372.6
Run defense: 126.8
Pass defense: 245.8

PASSING	YDS	PCT.	TD	INT
Stroud	4,435	71.9	44	6
RUSHING	ATT	YDS	AVG	TD
Henderson	184	1,255	6.82	15
Williams	71	507	7.14	3
Teague	66	348	5.27	4
RECEIVING	REC	YDS	AVG	TD
Smith-Njigba	85	1,606	16.91	9
Wilson	70	1,058	15.11	12

2022 schedule

S. 3 vs. Notre Dame
S. 10 vs. Arkansas State
S. 17 vs. Toledo
S. 24 vs. Wisconsin
O. 1 vs. Rutgers
O. 8 at Michigan State
O. 22 vs. Iowa
O. 29 at Penn State
N. 5 at Northwestern
N. 12 vs. Indiana
N. 19 at Maryland
N. 26 vs. Michigan



Receiver Jaxon Smith-Njigba caught 95 passes for 1,606 yards and nine TDs last season. JOSEPH MAIORANA/USA TODAY SPORTS

The schedule: Ohio State will hit the ground running with a prime-time opening date against Notre Dame. Each month will end with a major challenge. September wraps up with a potentially difficult Big Ten opener at home against Wisconsin. October ends with a trip to Penn State over Halloween weekend, and November concludes by hosting the annual season finale against Michigan.

Why this is a Top 10 team: The Buckeyes should once again score a plethora of points, which should keep them near the top of the polls. The goal, naturally, will be to reclaim the Big Ten throne.

There are a lot of numbers one could point out to illustrate just how devastating the Buckeye offense could be when firing on all cylinders, but we'll go with its lofty average of 7.96 yards a play, which was tops in the nation by nearly a quarter of a yard.

7.96

KEY NUMBER

#3

Georgia Bulldogs

Location: Athens, Georgia
Stadium: Sanford Stadium (1929)
Website: georgiadogs.com
Head coach: Kirby Smart, seventh season (81-66)

2022 IN REVIEW

Overall: 14-1
Conference: 8-1
Bowl: Beat Alabama 33-18 in College Football Playoff Championship

Stats and leaders

Points scored: 38.6
Total offense: 442.9
Rushing: 191.0
Passing: 251.9
Points allowed: 10.2
Total defense: 267.9
Run defense: 78.8
Pass defense: 189.1

PASSING	YDS	PCT.	TD	INT
Bennett	2,862	64.5	29	7
RUSHING	ATT	YDS	AVG	TD
White	160	856	5.35	11
Cook	113	728	6.44	7
McIntosh	58	330	5.69	3
RECEIVING	REC	YDS	AVG	TD
Bowers	56	882	15.75	13
Burton	26	497	19.12	5
McConkey	31	447	14.42	5

2022 schedule

S. 3 vs. Oregon*
 S. 10 vs. Samford
 S. 17 at South Carolina
 S. 24 vs. Kent State
 O. 1 at Missouri
 O. 8 vs. Auburn
 O. 15 vs. Vanderbilt
 O. 29 vs. Florida**
 N. 5 vs. Tennessee
 N. 12 at Mississippi State
 N. 19 at Kentucky
 N. 26 vs. Georgia Tech
 *Atlanta
 **Jacksonville, Florida

The situation: Now that the Bulldogs have reached the top of the mountain, they're about to experience life as the hunted. That really isn't new in the SEC East Division, of course, and even as the defending champs the Bulldogs might not be voted No. 1 in preseason polls. Even so, there are certainly enough returning veterans to make a repeat bid conceivable.

The offense will again be in the hands of Stetson Bennett IV, the often overlooked QB who was outstanding in the national title game. The backup situation remains up in the air with J.T. Daniels off to West Virginia, and the wide receiver position will be somewhat of a question mark as well with Jermaine Burton now at Alabama. Fortunately for Bennett, he'll again have the services of a deep TE unit led by Brock Bowers and Darnell Washington. Both sat out the spring game with injuries, but former LSU transfer Arik Gilbert, who was away from the team in 2021, gives that group yet another weapon. Among the wide-outs, the most accomplished returnee is Ladd McConkey. Top RBs Zamir White and James Cook have moved on, but there should be little drop in production with veterans Kenny McIntosh and Kendall Milton taking over.

The big reload will be on the defensive side, where a lot of next-level talent must be replaced (more on that below). The team also had to bid farewell to defensive coordinator Dan Lanning, now the head coach at Oregon, whose duties will now be shared by Glenn Schumann and Will Muschamp. One key returnee for the unit will be senior outside LB Nolan Smith, who recorded 56 total tackles and 3.5 sacks last year. Keep an eye on inside backer Jamon Dumas-Johnson, pegged by many observers as the Bulldogs' next great defensive star after his impressive spring.

The schedule: It's manageable all things considered, though the season opener against Oregon in Atlanta could be tricky. The SEC slate opens at South Carolina, which could also be more chal-



Jamon Dumas-Johnson had an interception and two sacks in his first season at Georgia. DALE ZANINE/USA TODAY

lenging than it has been in recent years. The annual showdown with archrival Florida on Oct. 29 is followed just a week later by potential SEC contender Tennessee, but fortunately for the Bulldogs that one will be in Athens. The yearly cross-over clash with Auburn is at home as well, so Bulldogs fans should have realistic expectations for another division crown.

Why this is a Top 10 team: Winning one title was hard enough, as Bulldogs fans well know. Repeating will be another major challenge, but Georgia will almost certainly be in the mix.

Eight members of the 2021 Bulldogs' defense were chosen in the NFL draft. Five of them went in the first round, including overall No. 1 selection DE Travon Walker and DT Jordan Davis, the Bednarik Award and Outland Trophy winner, at No. 13.

8

KEY NUMBER

#4

Michigan Wolverines

The situation: Jim Harbaugh and the Wolverines were able to exorcise one of their demons by finally vanquishing Ohio State en route to a Big Ten title and playoff berth in 2021. There are other demons, of course, like actually winning in the College Football Playoff. But first things first, as getting back there will be difficult enough this season.

The Wolverines' offense returns most key contributors from last year's playoff squad. QB Cade McNamara figures to retain the starting job, though he could get a push in the fall from J.J. McCarthy if McCarthy recovers from a shoulder injury that kept him out of spring practice. WRs Cornelius Johnson and Roman Wilson are also back, as is top TE Erick All. The receiving corps could also get a boost from the return of Ronnie Bell, who missed most of 2021 with an ACL injury.

"From my eye this looks like Ronnie Bell before he injured the ACL," Harbaugh said, according to the Detroit Free Press. "Just the way he's moving, I see him run, I see him jump, I see him cut. Definitely on track and looks about the same as he did before, maybe even a little bit better."

Rushing leader Hassan Haskins was drafted by the Tennessee Titans, but Blake Corum will slide easily into the lead role with Donovan Edwards getting his share of carries as well. The line will likely be centered by Olu Oluwatimi, a Rimington Trophy finalist (awarded to the top center) while playing at Virginia last year.

The defense has more holes to fill. The biggest void is left by DE Aidan Hutchinson, whose 14 sacks and 62 total tackles earned Heisman consideration. The next great Wolverines' edge rusher could be Mike Morris, who received favorable comparisons to Hutchinson from coaches in the spring. There are other experienced hands who will be key building blocks for the unit this year, including LBs Junior Colson and Nikhai Hill-Green and S R.J. Moten.

The schedule: The Wolverines don't have to leave Ann Arbor in September, so

Location: Ann Arbor, Mich.
Stadium: Michigan Stadium (1927)
Website: mgoblue.com
Head coach: Jim Harbaugh, eighth season (61-24)

2021 IN REVIEW

Overall: 12-2
Conference: 8-1
Bowl: Lost to Georgia 34-11 in Orange Bowl (CFP semifinal)

Stats and leaders

Points scored: 35.8
Total offense: 443.1
Rushing: 214.4
Passing: 228.7
Points allowed: 17.4
Total defense: 330.8
Run defense: 126.4
Pass defense: 204.4

PASSING	YDS	PCT.	TD	INT
McNamara	2,576	64.2	15	6
RUSHING	ATT	YDS	AVG	TD
Haskins	270	1,327	4.91	20
Corum	144	952	6.61	11
Edwards	35	174	4.97	3
RECEIVING	REC	YDS	AVG	TD
Johnson	40	627	15.70	3
All	38	437	11.50	2
Wilson	25	420	16.80	3

2022 schedule

S. 3 vs. Colorado State
S. 10 vs. Hawaii
S. 17 vs. Connecticut
S. 24 vs. Maryland
O. 1 at Iowa
O. 8 at Indiana
O. 15 vs. Penn State
O. 29 vs. Michigan State
N. 5 at Rutgers
N. 12 vs. Nebraska
N. 19 vs. Illinois
N. 26 at Ohio State



Mike Morris played in Aidan Hutchinson's shadow last year but has shown signs of dominance. RICK OSENTOSKI/USA TODAY SPORTS

anything short of a convincing 4-0 start will be cause for concern. But realistically there shouldn't be any issues until the Oct. 1 trip to Iowa. Penn State and Michigan State must come to the Big House, so the division figures once again to come down to the Nov. 26 visit to Columbus.

Why this is a Top 10 team: Getting over the hump against the Buckeyes was cathartic for followers of the Maize and Blue. The challenge now is to demonstrate the staying power to compete with its archrival on a yearly basis. This season alone won't answer that question, but the bar has clearly been raised.

5.22

KEY NUMBER

Michigan's productivity in the running game was a major factor in the team's offensive improvement en route to the Big Ten title. The Wolverines averaged a solid 5.22 yards per rushing attempt, allowing the unit to gain 165 of its 308 total first downs via the run.

#5

Oklahoma Sooners

Location: Norman, Oklahoma
Stadium: Gaylord Family – Oklahoma Memorial Stadium (1923)
Website: soonersports.com
Head coach: Brent Venables, first season

2021 IN REVIEW

Overall: 11-2
Conference: 7-2
Bowl: Beat Oregon 47-32 in Alamo Bowl

Stats and leaders

Points scored: 39.1
Total offense: 450.1
Rushing: 186.6
Passing: 263.5
Points allowed: 25.8
Total defense: 390.8
Run defense: 129.0
Pass defense: 261.8

PASSING	YDS	PCT.	TD	INT
Williams	1,912	64.5	21	4
RUSHING	ATT	YDS	AVG	TD
Brooks	198	1,253	6.33	13
Williams	79	435	5.51	6
Gray	78	412	5.26	2
RECEIVING	REC	YDS	AVG	TD
Mims	32	705	22.035	
Woods	35	400	11.432	
Haselwood	39	399	10.236	

S. 3 vs. Texas-El Paso
 S. 10 vs. Kent State
 S. 17 at Nebraska
 S. 24 vs. Kansas State
 O. 1 at TCU
 O. 8 vs. Texas*
 O. 15 vs. Kansas
 O. 29 at Iowa State
 N. 5 vs. Baylor
 N. 12 at West Virginia
 N. 19 vs. Oklahoma State
 N. 26 at Texas Tech
***Dallas**

The situation: It was an eventful off-season in Norman to say the least. That the 2021 campaign ended without a Big 12 title for the first time in seven years was irksome enough for the Sooners' faithful. But then came Lincoln Riley's abrupt departure for Southern Cal (right after the Oklahoma State game in November), followed by a whole lot of activity in the transfer portal. So begins the Brent Venables era at OU, with expectations lowered not at all.

Venables, of course, is no stranger to Norman having worked on Bob Stoops' staff for over a decade before his extraordinarily successful stint as Clemson's defensive coordinator. He brought in Jeff Lebby, most recently at Ole Miss, to coordinate the offense. After many departures from the QB room, including Caleb Williams and Spencer Rattler, the job will now belong to new arrival Dillon Gabriel. He'll have the benefit of knowing Lebby's system from the coach's prior stint at Central Florida, and Gabriel should be fully recovered from the collarbone injury that cut short his 2021 campaign at UCF.

There was also a bit of turnover among his would-be pass catchers. Marvin Mims is back, but Michael Woods is off to the Cleveland Browns and Jadon Haselwood transferred to Arkansas. But one receiver who decided to stick around is Theo Wease, who is hoping for a breakout year after a career plagued by injuries.

Longtime backfield mainstay Kennedy Brooks will be in camp with the Philadelphia Eagles, but there should still be a deep RB rotation available led by Eric Gray and Marcus Major.

Defense, Venables' specialty, is the area where fans are expecting his hire will have the most impact. He brought in veteran coach Ted Roof as coordinator to help oversee the retooling of the unit. A lot of position competitions will continue into fall camp, but LB DaShaun White will likely be among the group's on-field leaders.

The schedule: It's quite manageable



Dillon Gabriel, a transfer from Central Florida, is reunited with offensive coordinator Jeff Lebby. BRYAN TERRY/THE OKLAHOMAN

early on, assuming there is no hiccup in Week 3 in the return date at old Big Eight foe Nebraska. With the exception of the annual Red River showdown with Texas in Dallas and a visit to Iowa State, the Sooners will be at home for what figure to be their toughest Big 12 tests with Kansas State, Baylor and Oklahoma State all coming to Norman.

Why this is a Top 10 team: Even with all the changes on the sideline, the fans in Norman will expect the winning to continue. The Sooners will get their share of W's, but championships are the standard.

The special teams weren't so special at times in Lincoln Riley's final year at OU. The Sooners yielded two touchdowns on kickoff returns, including a costly one in the Bedlam showdown loss to Oklahoma State that officially ended their Big 12 reign.

2

KEY NUMBER

#6

Clemson Tigers

Location: Clemson, South Carolina
Stadium: Memorial Stadium (1941)
Website: clemsonigers.com
Head coach: Dabo Swinney, 15th season (150-36)

2021 IN REVIEW

Overall: 10-3
Conference: 6-2
Bowl: Beat Iowa State 20-13 in Cheez-It Bowl

Stats and leaders

Points scored: 26.3
Total offense: 359.2
Rushing: 168.0
Passing: 191.2
Points allowed: 14.8
Total defense: 305.5
Run defense: 96.3
Pass defense: 209.2

PASSING	YDS	PCT.	TD	INT
Uiagalelei	2,246	55.6	9	10
RUSHING	ATT	YDS	AVG	TD
Shipley	149	739	4.96	11
Pace	104	641	6.16	6
Uiagalelei	105	308	2.93	4
RECEIVING	REC	YDS	AVG	TD
Ross	46	514	11.17	3
Ngata	23	438	19.04	1
B. Collins	31	407	13.13	3

2022 schedule

S. 5 at Georgia Tech*
S. 10 vs. Furman
S. 17 vs. Louisiana Tech
S. 24 at Wake Forest
O. 1 vs. N.C. State
O. 8 at Boston College
O. 15 at Florida State
O. 22 vs. Syracuse
N. 5 at Notre Dame
N. 12 vs. Louisville
N. 19 vs. Miami (Fla.)
N. 26 vs. South Carolina
*Atlanta

The situation: It was an unusual year at Clemson, and not just because the Tigers did not win the ACC and were all but eliminated from the playoff picture early on. Yes, the team still won 10 games, but it didn't have the look of the elite teams Dabo Swinney had put on the field in recent seasons.

Add in the fact that there are two new coordinators on the sideline, and there's more than a little uncertainty heading into the fall.

On the offensive side, Swinney promoted QB coach Brandon Streeter to the coordinator position with Tony Elliott off to Virginia. It is that unit's performance that most Tigers observers held responsible for the team's subpar campaign, and the numbers undoubtedly support that view (more on that thought later). QB D.J. Uiagalelei is back, but he'll need to stave off a challenge from early enrollee Cade Klubnik to retain the starting job. With WR Justyn Ross gone, more consistency will be needed from Joseph Ngata and Beaux Collins.

RBs Will Shipley and Kobe Pace (nearly 1,400 yards combined on the ground in 2021) also return, but the entire attack must get better line play.

The defense by and large held up its end last year despite having to play more minutes. With the departure of Brent Venables to Oklahoma, Wes Goodwin and Mickey Conn will be serving as co-coordinators for the unit that shouldn't experience much of a drop-off given the returning talent. DE Xavier Thomas and Myles Murphy will be back to lead what should be a devastating pass rush, and DT Bryan Bresee is also expected back after a knee injury cut last season short. There are more holes to fill in the back seven, but LB Trenton Simpson and S Andrew Mukuba return to provide stability.

The schedule: If Clemson is indeed back to being Clemson again, the slate should offer few pitfalls. But if the Labor Day night opener at Georgia Tech is at all a struggle as last year's meeting with the Yellow Jackets was (a 14-8 Clemson win),



Returning defensive end Myles Murphy led Clemson with seven sacks last season. JAMIE RHODES/USA TODAY SPORTS

Tiger fans will be more than a little nervous. If Clemson handles the Sept. 24 trip to Wake Forest and home tilt with North Carolina State a week later, the ACC Atlantic could be all but wrapped up early. The Nov. 5 date at Notre Dame could loom large if a playoff appearance is still on the table.

Why this is a Top 10 team: The Tigers' playoff success has earned them the benefit of more than a few doubts, ergo this lofty starting point. But to stay there, Clemson must re-establish its dominance of the ACC, even if the rest of the league is indeed closing the gap.

The Clemson offense wasn't terrible in 2021, but neither was it exceptional. The Tigers averaged a pedestrian 5.17 yards per snap, a stark contrast from the 7.35-yard clip put up by the 2018 national championship squad.

5.17
KEY NUMBER

#7

Utah
Utes

Location: Salt Lake City
Stadium: Rice-Eccles Stadium (1998)
Website: utahutes.com
Head coach: Kyle Whittingham, 19th season (144-70)

2021 IN REVIEW

Overall: 10-4
Conference: 8-1
Bowl: Lost to Ohio State 48-45 in Rose Bowl

Stats and leaders

Points scored: 36.1
Total offense: 431.5
Rushing: 217.2
Passing: 214.3
Points allowed: 22.6
Total defense: 344.1
Run defense: 121.8
Pass defense: 222.3

PASSING	YDS	PCT.	TD	INT
Rising	2,493	63.8	20	5
RUSHING	ATT	YDS	AVG	TD
Thomas	204	1,108	5.43	21
Pledger	104	694	6.67	6
Bernard	87	529	6.08	2
RECEIVING	REC	YDS	AVG	TD
Kuithe	50	611	12.22	6
Covey	52	514	9.88	3
Kincaid	36	510	14.17	8

2022 schedule

S. 3 at Florida
 S. 10 vs. Southern Utah
 S. 17 vs. San Diego State
 S. 24 at Arizona State
 O. 1 vs. Oregon State
 O. 8 at UCLA
 O. 15 vs. Southern California
 O. 22 at Washington State
 N. 5 vs. Arizona
 N. 12 vs. Stanford
 N. 19 at Oregon
 N. 26 at Colorado

The situation: Utah's 1-2 start last season didn't exactly presage a Pac-12 championship run. But the Utes reversed their fortunes after those early non-conference setbacks and earned the program's first Rose Bowl appearance. The Utes will now face the challenge of elevated expectations heading into 2022.

It's a bit of an oversimplification to say the Utes' season turned around when Cameron Rising took over at quarterback, but his impact on the performance of the offense was undeniable. With Rising now firmly entrenched as the starter, Bryson Barnes and Ja'Quinden Jackson, both of whom played well in the spring game, will continue their competition in the fall for the backup role. Britain Covey's all-around talent as a pass catcher and return threat will be missed, but experienced hands like TEs Brant Kuithe and Dalton Kincaid should help keep the chains moving. The breakout star in the aerial game, however, could be WR Devaughn Vele, who flashed his potential last year as a freshman averaging nearly 17 yards per reception. The ground game should again be solid as well with Tavion Thomas, a possible Doak Walker Award candidate, back to lead a deep rotation. T.J. Pledger opted to pursue a professional career, but versatile Micah Bernard figures to get more touches, and freshman Jaylon Glover could contribute immediately as well.

An all-around talent like first-round draft pick Devin Lloyd can't just be replaced. His linebacker running mate, Nephi Sewell, is also gone, but the second level of the defense has options. The leader is likely Florida transfer Mohammad Diabate, and returnee Hayden Furrey should take on more responsibilities. DE Van Fillinger, who had 5.5 sacks as a freshman, leads the pass rush. The secondary features veterans in SS Cole Bishop and CB Clark Phillips III but more depth must be developed.

The schedule: It starts with a bang with a cross-country trip to Florida. The home date with usual Mountain West contender San Diego State won't be a



Cameron Rising passed for 2,493 yards and rushed for 499 last season. He totaled 26 touchdowns. GARY A. VASQUEZ/USA TODAY

picnic, either, as the Utes well know from last season's loss to the Aztecs. But if they can get through September unscathed, the Oct. 15 home showdown with Southern California should be appointment viewing. The late visit to Oregon could prove to be ill-timed if either or both are still in the playoff picture.

Why this is a Top 10 team: The Pac-12 is once again in the position of trying to prove its viability as a power conference. As such, the Utes have little margin for error if they want to retain their high ranking, but another league title is well within the realm of possibility.

Utah might not be the first team that springs to mind when talking about the most explosive offenses in the country. But the Utes ranked eighth nationally in plays of 10-plus yards in 2021 with 244, over 17 a game.

244
KEY NUMBER

#8

Texas A&M Aggies

The situation: The Jimbo Fisher era in College Station has been a mixed bag for Aggies fans. Last season was a case in point, with moments like the Alabama win that showed the program’s promise but also several stumbles that produced grumbles. Winning the SEC is anything but easy, of course, but such was the not-so-implicit expectation when Fisher signed his big contract.

As is often the case, the Aggies roster entering the fall will feature plenty of talent but also a whole lot of questions. Naturally, the first one most fans will ask is who will be the quarterback? It will obviously not be Zach Calzada, who has transferred to Auburn. Haynes King, last year’s opening-day starter who suffered an early injury, is still around but is competing with LSU transfer Max Johnson and five-star recruit Conner Weigman.

The next question is how does the coaching staff best utilize speedy RB Devon Achane, who moonlighted for the track team in the spring? He figures to be the main ball carrier with Isaiah Spiller off to the NFL, but it might be tempting to see what he can do when split out wide with Amari Daniels, a capable back in his own right, backing him up. The departure of TE Jalen Wydermyer for the pros leaves Ainias Smith as the most accomplished receiver in camp. Look for Jalen Preston to emerge as a frequent target in the slot.

There are a lot of replacements needed on the defensive side, especially up front where most top pass rushers from 2021 are gone. DEs Tunmise Adeleye and Fadil Diggs should get the first opportunities. There’s a bit more experience behind them, with Edgerrin Cooper and Andre White Jr. likely retaining the line-backer spots for new defensive coordinator DJ Durkin. The defense should still be one of the best in the conference.

The schedule: Competing in the SEC West is challenging enough, but the Aggies have an especially bad break with no games in College Station between Sept. 17 and Oct. 29.

That stretch includes a neutral site

Location: College Station, Texas
Stadium: Kyle Field (1905)
Website: 12thman.com
Head coach: Jimbo Fisher, fifth season (34-14)

2021 IN REVIEW

Overall: 8-4
Conference: 4-4
Bowl: Unable to participate in Gator Bowl due to COVID outbreak.

Stats and leaders

Points scored: 29.3
Total offense: 391.6
Rushing: 183.0
Passing: 208.6
Points allowed: 15.9
Total defense: 327.5
Run defense: 134.8
Pass defense: 192.7

PASSING	YDS	PCT.	TD	INT
Calzada	2,185	56.1	17	9
RUSHING	ATT	YDS	AVG	TD
Spiller	179	1,011	5.65	6
Achane	130	910	7.00	9
Daniels	20	119	5.95	1
RECEIVING	REC	YDS	AVG	TD
Wydermyer	40	515	12.88	4
Smith	47	509	10.83	6
Achane	24	261	10.88	1

2022 schedule

S. 3 vs. Sam Houston State
S. 10 vs. Appalachian State
S. 17 vs. Miami (Fla.)
S. 24 vs. Arkansas*
O. 1 at Mississippi State
O. 8 at Alabama
O. 22 at South Carolina
O. 29 vs. Mississippi
N. 5 vs. Florida
N. 12 at Auburn
N. 19 vs. Massachusetts
N. 26 vs. LSU
*Arlington, Texas



Jimbo Fisher won a national title at Florida State but has been inconsistent at Texas A&M. THOMAS SHEA/USA TODAY SPORTS

clash with Arkansas in Arlington, Texas, as well as the Oct. 8 trip to Tuscaloosa, where Fisher and Co. are sure to receive a warm reception. Things do even out a bit down the stretch with four of the last five at home, including the finale against LSU.

Why this is a Top 10 team: Life in the SEC is a double-edged sword, with opportunities aplenty for big wins but road blocks around every corner. In order for the Aggies to join the truly elite programs, they must prove they can negotiate not just most but all of the tests on the schedule.

A bit more on Devon Achane, whose total of 1,472 all-purpose yards led the team last year. This number was helped by 301 yards on kickoff returns, including that unforgettable 96-yard score that helped seal the Alabama victory.

1,472
KEY NUMBER

#9

N.C. State Wolfpack

Location: Raleigh N.C.
Stadium: Carter-Finley Stadium (1966)
Website: Gopack.com
Head coach: Dave Doeren, 10th season (64-49)

2021 IN REVIEW

Overall: 9-3
Conference: 6-2
Bowl: Holiday Bowl canceled; UCLA unable to participate due to COVID

Stats and leaders

Points scored: 33.1
Total offense: 414.6
Rushing: 126.2
Passing: 288.4
Points allowed: 19.7
Total defense: 330.8
Run defense: 123.2
Pass defense: 207.6

PASSING	YDS	PCT	TD	INT
Leary	3,433	65.7	35	5
RUSHING	ATT	YDS	AVG	TD
Knight	140	753	5.38	3
Person	135	636	4.71	5
Houston	20	83	4.15	1
RECEIVING	REC	YDS	AVG	TD
Emezie	60	802	13.37	6
Thomas	51	596	11.69	8
Carter	31	556	17.94	6

2022 schedule

S. 3 at East Carolina
 S. 10 vs. Charleston Southern
 S. 17 vs. Texas Tech
 S. 24 vs. Connecticut
 O. 1 at Clemson
 O. 8 vs. Florida State
 O. 15 at Syracuse
 O. 27 vs. Virginia Tech
 N. 5 vs. Wake Forest
 N. 12 vs. Boston College
 N. 19 at Louisville
 N. 25 at North Carolina

The situation: Back-to-back winning seasons have changed the outlook considerably for the Wolfpack program and coach Dave Doeren, whose chair was more than a little warm following a 4-8 finish in 2019. Last year's squad came up a bit short of playing for the Atlantic Coast Conference crown, and the team is looking to take that next step this fall.

Given the present dominance of offense throughout the sport, the primary cause for the optimism in Raleigh is the return of prolific QB Devin Leary. He'll be without record-setting WR Emeka Emezie, but his next two top targets, Thayer Thomas and Devin Carter, are back. There are numerous other talented pass catchers on the roster, but look for sophomore Porter Rooks to emerge as this year's breakout star. Leary's backup should again be Ben Finley, who will be entering his fourth year in the program but will be listed as a redshirt freshman due to COVID-19 eligibility rules. The productive RB tandem of Zonovan Knight and Ricky Person must be replaced, with Jordan Houston likely to become the featured back.

The offense's biggest concern arguably is finding a successor for LT Ikem Ekwonu, Leary's primary protector who was drafted sixth overall by the Carolina Panthers. The line overall should still be in good shape with C Grant Gibson anchoring the middle and versatile Bryson Spears able to play where he's most needed. The defense returns nearly intact, but the unit needs to show more consistency against the high-octane attacks it will encounter in ACC play. The most significant departures are DE Daniel Joseph and LB Vi Jones, but the back eight should be solid with experienced hands like LB Drake Thomas and S Tanner Ingle. LBs Payton Wilson, the Pack's leading tackler in 2019 and 2020 who was out with shoulder issues all of last season, and Isaiah Moore, a terrific run stuffer whose season was cut short by a knee injury, also hope to return in the fall.

The schedule: If all goes according to plan, the Wolfpack will be 4-0 heading



Devin Leary has thrown for 51 touchdown passes in three seasons at N.C. State. PAUL RUTHERFORD/USA TODAY

into the huge Oct. 1 trip to Clemson that could ultimately determine the ACC Atlantic Division. A Thursday night tilt with Virginia Tech kicks off a three-game homestand, but the campaign concludes with road contests at Louisville and rival North Carolina.

Why this is a Top 10 team: There's a sense of unfinished business after last year's team was unable to become the second in program history with double-digit wins after the Holiday Bowl was canceled due to COVID-19 concerns. It will take a few breaks, but a conference championship is attainable.

Perhaps it was more bad luck than anything else, but in a curious statistical quirk in 2021 the Wolfpack defense recovered just one fumble, dead last in the nation. That one scoop did result in a touchdown against Boston College, and the group compensated with 15 interceptions to end up with a positive turnover margin overall.

KEY NUMBER

#10

BYU
Cougars

Location: Provo, Utah
Stadium: Lavell Edwards Stadium (1964)
Website: byucougars.com
Head coach: Kalani Sitake, seventh season (48-29)

2021 IN REVIEW

Overall: 10-3
Conference: NA
Bowl: Lost to UAB 31-28 in Independence Bowl

Stats and leaders

Points scored: 33.1
Total offense: 452.2
Rushing: 188.2
Passing: 264.1
Points allowed: 24.8
Total defense: 389.0
Run defense: 156.3
Pass defense: 231.9

PASSING	YDS	PCT.	TD	INT
Hall	2,583	63.9	20	5
RUSHING	ATT	YDS	AVG	TD
Allgeier	276	1,606	5.82	23
Hall	62	307	4.95	3
Katoa	61	242	3.97	2
RECEIVING	REC	YDS	AVG	TD
Nacua	43	805	18.72	6
Romney	34	594	17.47	3
Pau'u	46	526	11.43	6

2022 schedule

S. 3 at South Florida
S. 10 vs. Baylor
S. 17 at Oregon
S. 24 vs. Wyoming
S. 29 vs. Utah State
O. 8 vs. Notre Dame*
O. 15 vs. Arkansas
O. 22 at Liberty
O. 28 vs. East Carolina
N. 5 at Boise State
N. 19 vs. Utah Tech
N. 26 at Stanford
*Las Vegas

The situation: With Big 12 membership on the horizon, it would be easy to think of this as a transition year in Provo. But the Cougars still have lofty goals for their last season of independence, and they just might have the personnel in place to achieve them. Yes, last season's bowl loss put a damper on the Cougars' second consecutive double-digit win campaign, but the depth and experience on this year's roster has everyone around the program thinking big.

The offense will once again be run by QB Jaren Hall. He was back to work in the spring after missing the Independence Bowl with an injury and should be a full go once the season rolls around. Last year's backup Baylor Romney is off to pursue a career in the real world, so Jacob Conover figures to be the most likely No. 2 option.

WR Neil Pau'u is gone, but Puka Nacua and Gunner Romney are back to lead a deep pass-catching unit. Former California Bear Chris Brooks should quickly fill the shoes of departed RB Tyler Allgeier, with returnee Lopini Katoa likely getting his share of carries as well. But it's the interior line, described by some as Big 12 ready, that has people around the program excited, with veterans like Blake Freeland and Clark Barrington anchoring the left side.

Whether the Cougars can achieve their lofty goals in 2022 could hinge upon the defense, which needs to take the next step for the team to be elite. That must start with more pressure up front, and DE Tyler Batty figures to lead the charge.

The linebackers' room was hit hard by the injury bug last year, but that could become a benefit in terms of experienced depth if Payton Wilgar and Keenan Pili are back at full strength come autumn to rejoin returning tackles leader Ben Bywater.

FS Malik Moore is also back to anchor the secondary.

The schedule: The Week 2 home opener against future Big 12 opponent Baylor is followed a week later by a visit



Jaren Hall threw 20 touchdown passes against five interceptions last season. KIRBY LEE/USA TODAY SPORTS

to Oregon. October features a tough three-game stretch starting with a date with Notre Dame in Las Vegas, a home contest with Arkansas, and a long trip to Liberty.

The Cougars will likely need to win at least four of those to be in the New Year's Six bowl mix, but it is within the realm of possibility.

Why this is a Top 10 team: We'll find out fairly quickly if indeed it is. There should be enough available wins on the schedule to go bowling, but the Cougars will have higher aims of capping a special year with a major postseason invitation.

While one statistic doesn't tell the full story, the Cougars' third-down defensive effectiveness is one area that must be better. The 2021 unit struggled to get off the field, allowing opponents to convert at a 43.02% clip.

43.02

KEY NUMBER

HEISMAN WATCH

Paul Myerberg
USA TODAY

The race for the 2022 Heisman Trophy is quarterback-driven, as always, and as the calendar flips through the summer has coalesced around three big names: Alabama's Bryce Young, Ohio State's C.J. Stroud and Southern Cal's Caleb Williams.

Young is the defending Heisman winner. Stroud was the fourth OSU standout in four years to finish in the top four. Williams took the Football Bowl Subdivision by storm midway through his true freshman season and is poised to become the face of college football on the West Coast after following Oklahoma coach Lincoln Riley to the Pac-12.

But there's plenty of room in the preseason Heisman conversation for some of the most impactful players in the FBS.

One is Alabama linebacker Will Anderson Jr., perhaps the top overall prospect regardless of position. Another is Texas running back Bijan Robinson, should he stay injury-free while the Longhorns take a big step forward after a dreadful 2021.

There are even a handful of other quarterbacks capable of making Heisman headlines. One passer, Wake Forest's Sam Hartman, may be difficult to ignore should he lead coach Dave Clawson's Demon Deacons to another year with 10 or more wins.

Here are the top contenders for the Heisman heading into the regular season:

QB Bryce Young, Alabama (Jr.)

The list of players who have failed to bring home a second Heisman since Archie Griffin did so in 1975 is long and illustrious: Ty Detmer, Matt Leinart, Tim Tebow and Johnny Manziel are among those who have tried and failed to match Griffin's achievement. What gives Young a shot at making history in what is likely his final season with the Crimson Tide? That Alabama is the favorite to win it all after finishing second in 2021. Another is the projected improvement of an offensive line that was unexpectedly unreliable. Young will also play alongside an unmatched collection of skill talent, including one of the top portal additions in former Georgia Tech running back Jahmyr Gibbs.

QB C.J. Stroud, Ohio State (So.)

OSU lost first-round picks Garrett Wilson and Chris Olave but bring back preseason All-American lock Jaxson Smith-Njigba, along with a number of top prospects ready to take on a larger role in the Buckeyes' offense. In other words: Don't worry about Stroud matching last year's ridiculous numbers (4,435 yards and 44 touch-

QBs, RBs and LB coming after Young



Alabama linebacker Will Anderson Jr. might be perhaps the nation's top overall prospect regardless of position. MARK J. REBILAS/USA TODAY SPORTS

downs on 10.1 yards per throw) despite a loss of star power at receiver. Stroud could easily unseat Young and take home the Heisman with another strong season and a Big Ten championship.

QB Caleb Williams, Southern Cal (So.)

There are definitely questions about the

overall state of the roster under Riley, making it premature to anoint the Trojans as the team to beat in the Pac-12 and a playoff contender. But there are fewer concerns about the health of the offense after USC added Pittsburgh receiver Jordan Addison, giving Williams one of the top skill talents in the country as the centerpiece of the passing game. While not yet a finished product, he will be the top passer in the

Texas running back Bijan Robinson is a do-everything player who went for 1,127 yards on the ground and 295 yards as a receiver despite missing the last two games in 2021. KEVIN JAIRAJ/USA TODAY SPORTS



conference and a major contender for postseason hardware should USC make a run at a New Year's Six bowl.

LB Will Anderson Jr., Alabama (Jr.)

The most dominant defender in college football is an unstoppable menace capable of destroying even the best-laid offensive game plans. Here's one way to put his incredible 2021 season into perspective: Anderson led the FBS with 33.5 tackles for loss, a more than 50% increase over second-place finisher Devin Lloyd of Utah (22 tackles for loss). While no pure defensive player has won the Heisman, Anderson may put up numbers that are too good to ignore and write himself into college football history.

RB Bijan Robinson, Texas (Jr.)

Robinson's a do-everything skill talent

who went for 1,127 yards on the ground and 295 yards as a receiver despite missing the final two games of the 2021 season – despite playing on one of the worst teams in modern program history under first-year coach Steve Sarkisian. But having shown that he can play at an All-American level on a losing team, a healthy Robinson could be even more productive if the Longhorns' offense takes a leap with more experience in Sarkisian's scheme and newcomer Quinn Ewers taking over at quarterback.

QB Dillon Gabriel, Oklahoma (Jr.)

Beyond his impressive track record in two-plus seasons at Central Florida, what makes Gabriel a Heisman threat is his relationship with Oklahoma offensive coordinator Jeff Leiby, who once held the same position with the Knights. In addition to the solid supporting cast with the Sooners, Gabriel's familiarity with the scheme will

Wake Forest QB Sam Hartman had a breakout 2021 with 4,288 yards and 39 scores passing. COREY PERRINE/ THE FLORIDA TIMES-UNION VIA AP

let him hit the ground running and replace Williams as the best quarterback in the Big 12.

QB Tyler Van Dyke, Miami (Fla.) (So.)

There's little question about Van Dyke's ability to put up big numbers for the Hurricanes after playing as well as any quarterback in the Power Five in the second half of last season. Van Dyke threw for at least three touchdowns in each of his final six games of 2021. His Heisman campaign rests more on one of the dominant questions of the summer in the Atlantic Coast Conference: How quickly can Mario Cristobal turn Miami around?

QB Sam Hartman, Wake Forest (Jr.)

The fast-rising prospect could make a run at several conference and FBS records should he complete his eligibility at Wake Forest. (He's a fifth-year junior as a result of the four-game redshirt rule and the blanket extra year of eligibility granted due to COVID-19.) Hartman would finish second in FBS history in career yardage and touchdowns should he match last year's breakout totals of 4,288 yards and 39 scores. In fact, he should be even more prolific in 2022 as the headliner on what might be one of the top teams in program history.

RB Braelon Allen, Wisconsin (So.)

Allen had only 12 carries for 49 yards in the first four games of his freshman season but exploded in conference play, topping the 100-yard mark in his next seven games and then going for 159 yards in Wisconsin's Las Vegas Bowl win against Arizona State. The Big Ten's leading returning rusher (1,268) wasn't a weapon out of the backfield; he made only eight grabs in 2021. But Allen could go beyond 1,500 yards on the ground.

QB Will Levis, Kentucky (Sr.)

The Penn State transfer was terrific in his first season with the Wildcats, throwing for 2,812 yards, running for 376 yards and scoring 33 combined touchdowns in leading Kentucky to the fourth year with double-digit wins in program history. Levis will have to overcome two big off-season losses: wide receiver Wan'Dale Robinson, a second-round NFL draft pick, and offensive coordinator Liam Cohen, who joined the NFL's Los Angeles Rams. But the Kentucky Wildcats will have one of the top backfields in the Southeastern Conference in Levis and running back Chris Rodriguez.

PROJECTED RECORDS

By Paul Myerberg
Champion: Houston

	Conf.	Overall
Houston	7-1	10-2
Cincinnati	6-2	9-3
Central Florida	6-2	9-3
East Carolina	5-3	7-5
SMU	4-4	6-6
Tulane	4-4	7-5
Memphis	4-4	6-6
Navy	3-5	5-7
Tulsa	2-6	4-8
South Florida	2-6	3-9
Temple	1-7	3-9

PLAYERS TO WATCH

QB Mikey Keene, So., UCF: The sophomore quarterback is expected to improve in Year 2. Coupled with the Knights’ aggressive offense, look for him to take a big step forward.

QB Clayton Tune, Sr., Houston: If Houston finally makes the step to take over the AAC in its final year before moving to the Big 12, Tune will be the reason. The Cougars have top-tier talent at WR and TE, so it’s easy to envision them leading the conference in passing yards and touchdowns.

TE Josh Whyte, Sr., Cincinnati: If the Bearcats are going to repeat as conference champions, they’ll need production from the tight end position. The Bearcats have sent pass-catching tight ends to the NFL. Now, the Bearcats have a new quarterback with Desmond Ridder playing for the Atlanta Falcons.

DB Quindell Johnson, R-Sr., Memphis: After an abysmal 2021 campaign, the Tigers will need to improve on their league-worst third-down defense and a defense that allowed more than 32 points per game in the AAC last season. All that success starts with Johnson, who recorded 104 tackles last season as well as a sack, fumble recovery and interception.

AMERICAN ATHLETIC

Central Florida

2021 record: 9-4, 5-3
Top players: LS Alex Ward, OL Samuel Jackson, DT Anthony Montalvo

UCF has not been crowned a conference champion since 2018, getting snubbed by Cincinnati and Memphis the past three years. They have two titles in two appearances, the first under Scott Frost in 2017 and the second under Josh Heupel in 2018. In July of 2023, UCF will be joining Cincinnati and Houston in the move to the Big 12, what some would call greener pastures. UCF returns RB Isaiah Bowser, who led the team with nine TDs and was the team’s second-leading rusher (703 yards).

Cincinnati

2021 record: 13-1, 8-0
Top players: CB Arquon Bush, LB Deshawn Pace, TE Josh Whyte

Under three-time AAC Coach of the Year Luke Fickell (2018, ’20 and ’21), the back-to-back AAC champion Bearcats compiled a 44-7 record over the last four seasons and became the first Group of Five team to crack the College Football Playoff last season. Cincinnati had a program-record nine players selected in the 2022 NFL draft, including cornerback Ahmad “Sauce” Gardner (unanimous 2021 AAC Defensive Player of the Year) and quarterback Desmond Ridder (2020 and ’21 AAC Offensive Player of the Year). While Bush (84 tackles, 17 pass breakups and seven interceptions in his career) is expected to step into the consensus All-American shoes Gardner left behind, Fickell has yet to decide who will replace the record-setting Ridder. Sophomore Evan Prater (0 career starts) and senior Ben Bryant (3,121 passing yards, 14 touchdowns and seven interceptions last season at Eastern Michigan) are expected to battle through fall camp for the starting job. Ridder started each of the past four seasons for



Cincinnati tight end Josh Whyle led the Bearcats last season with 353 yards and six receiving touchdowns. KATIE STRATMAN/USA TODAY SPORTS

the Bearcats.

East Carolina

2021 record: 7-5, 5-3
Top players: RB Keaton Mitchell, QB Holton Ahlers, WR CJ Johnson

Who is going to replace Ja’Quan McMillian? McMillian signed with the Denver Broncos as an undrafted free agent after his sophomore season, leaving a hefty gap in the production efficiency of the Pirates lineup. Thoughts have led to CB Malik Fleming Jr., who had a solid 2021 season, recording 34 tackles, two interceptions and nine tackles for loss. But, he’s never had shoes quite this big to fill. Alongside S Shawn Dourseau, he will have to be the next man up and anchor the young, re-worked secondary.

Houston

2021 record: 12-2, 8-0
Top players: WR Nathaniel Dell, DE Derek Parish, LB Donovan Mutin

Houston, like Cincinnati, ended its 2021 season at the top of the pack, undefeated in conference games. Head coach Dana Holgorsen has poised the Cougars for sustained success going into the upcoming season, dating back to his idea in 2019 to age the roster under the NCAA eligibility and redshirting rules. QB Clayton Tune, for example, had a career-year in 2021, turning the page from sour, sloppy mistakes that cost UH wins. Not only is Tune still fanning the fire he started on the field, but he has some solid backups this year in Ike Ogbogu and Holman Edwards to keep things hot. They can throw to Dell, the leading receiver last season (1,329 yards, 12 TDs).

Memphis

2021 record: 6-6, 3-5
Top players: QB Seth Henigan, S Quindell Johnson, CB Greg Rubin
Memphis last won the AAC in 2019. Will the Tigers be able to get the running game going

again? Leading rushing Brandon Thomas returns (669 yards, eight TDs). Memphis hasn’t had a terrifying offensive running game since 2018, when it ripped through the conference for close to 4,000 rushing yards and 48 touchdowns while averaging over six yards per carry. In 2019, the Tigers were balancing themselves out, winning an AAC Championship and going to one of the New Year’s Six bowls with over 2,600 yards and 32 touchdowns. In 2020, they totaled nine touchdowns, five in a single game. And last year, they averaged under four yards per carry and got past 157 yards just one game out of the final 10 in the season - despite their hot start. College Football News said they’re 19-0 when tracking 160 yards or more. Coincidence?

Navy

2021 record: 4-8, 3-5
Top players: S John Marshall, OT Kip Frankland, DT Clay Cromwell
While the Midshipmen have

not been competitive in the AAC recently, coach Ken Niumatalo's squad can be difficult to beat down the stretch because of their scheme. Which running back will step up for big plays in the triple-option attack? Statistics point to sophomore Maquel Haywood. Last season, the All-East kick returner closed out with an average of 31 yards per return on 12 returns to become the third best in program history. He had a 98-yard kickoff returned for a touchdown against ECU, which is the first of his career, the first since 2012 and the longest in Midshipmen history. QB Tai Lavatai returns after rushing for 371 yards and seven TDs. He passed for 449 yards and five more TDs.

South Florida

2021 record: 2-10, 1-7

Top players: QB Timmy McClain, LB Antonio Grier, RB Jaren Mangham

Can Jeff Scott turn the program around? This team needs a whole revamp in their depth chart, especially when it comes to rebuilding something on the defensive front, and the Bulls' schedule surely isn't going to give them any help and chance to crank up the confidence. But, they've garnered up a variety of transfer players, mostly from Power 5 programs, to new coordinators on both sides of the ball, so one could say Scott is making a step in the right direction.

SMU

2021 record: 8-4, 4-4

Top players: WR Rashee Rice, OT Jaylon Thomas, DE Elijah Chatman

Last season, the Mustangs allowed 415 yards and 28 points per game, shuffling lots of problems against the better passing games while exceling against the run. This season, the secondary just has to do its part to lift the front three up. This is where the outside linebackers and cornerbacks come in and with Louisiana-Monroe veteran Nick Roberts being as good of a tackler as he is – recording 38 last season – they might just be in for a treat. On offense, QB Tanner Mordecai (3,628 pass-



Houston quarterback Clayton Tune passed for 3,544 yards and 30 touchdowns (against 10 interceptions) last season. KAREEM ELGAZZAR/THE CINCINNATI ENQUIRER

ing yards, 39 TDs, 12 INTs) returns. SMU is entering its first campaign with head coach Rhett Lashlee, its former offensive coordinator who replaces Sonny Dykes, who departed for TCU.

Temple

2021 record: 3-9, 1-7

Top players: DT Darian Verner, WR Adonias Sanders, QB D'Wan Mathis

The Owls are a struggling college football program, and most everyone can see that. After they were stomped into the ground last season by their AAC counterparts, it's not looking too hopeful for the 2022 calendar. However, head coach Stan Drayton is building something, having recently added two Power 5 transfers to his roster: Norwood and Sanders. Norwood is

coming from Illinois and the Big Ten after a rough start to his collegiate career with injury. Last season, he recorded 27 carries for 120 rushing yards and had his first career-start against Texas-San Antonio. Sanders is coming from Georgia Tech and the ACC, where he was a top prospect during his sophomore season. Last season, he played in nine games and totaled 29 receptions for 362 yards and three touchdowns, including a game winner against Duke.

Tulane

2021 record: 2-10, 1-7

Top players: QB Carson Haggard, TE Blake Gunter, DL Maxie Baudoin IV

It's not typical of teams who have as poor a season as Tulane did to gain recruiting momentum. However, head coach Wil-

lie Fritz has recorded his highest-rated class of the last century and third-best finish out of the last eight classes – fourth since Rivals began in 2002 – for the program. Back in February, their athletic department said 23 players from 10 states were added to the squad and 13 of those players were ranked three-star recruits by the likes of ESPN, Rivals and 247Sports.

Tulsa

2021 record: 7-6, 5-3

Top players: QB Davis Brin, RB Deneric Prince, RB Anthony Watkins

In 2020, Tulsa went 6-3, 6-0 in-conference, when the Golden Hurricanes only allowed 21.56 points per game from their opponents and 194 total. Those numbers shifted dramatically in 2021, when they allowed and

CAN'T-MISS GAMES

Tulane at Houston, Sept. 30: Fresh off a contract extension and entering their final season in the AAC, Houston coach Dana Holgorsen's veteran squad will need to prove it's for real when league play opens against Tulane. The Green Wave had a disappointing 2021 due mostly to woes in the defensive secondary. This game has the potential to see a lot of points scored in a hurry.

Cincinnati at UCF, Oct. 29: If preseason rankings are to be believed, this game will theoretically decide at least one of the participants in the AAC championship game. The Knights host the Bearcats at the notorious Bounce House in Orlando and are predicted by many to be the best team in the conference this season. The Bearcats had a school-record nine players selected in the 2022 NFL draft.

Navy at UCF, Nov. 19: Navy's triple-option offense can wear on a team over the course of the game and limit scoring opportunities. If UCF is going to get back to the top of the AAC, it'll need to pass this late-season test.

Memphis at SMU, Nov. 26: While neither the Tigers nor Mustangs are predicted to finish atop the AAC this season, this game should be circled on the calendar because both teams have a chance to be the conference's dark horse.

scored the same number of points, roughly, from and on their opponent (26.38-26.62). In the spring game, the defense held the advantage, holding the offense to 16 points on a touchdown and three field goals. It also had eight tackles for loss with five sacks, a pass breakup and limited the offense to 48 yards rushing on 30 carries.

– Sara Tidwell,
The Cincinnati Enquirer
Contributing: Keith Jenkins

PROJECTED RECORDS

By Paul Myerberg
Champion: Clemson

Atlantic	Conf.	Overall
Clemson	7-1	10-2
N.C. State	6-2	10-2
Wake Forest	6-2	10-2
Florida State	4-4	7-5
Boston College	4-4	7-5
Louisville	3-5	5-7
Syracuse	1-7	3-9

Coastal	Conf.	Overall
Pittsburgh	6-2	9-3
North Carolina	5-3	9-3
Miami (Fla.)	5-3	8-4
Virginia	4-4	7-5
Virginia Tech	3-5	6-6
Georgia Tech	1-7	2-10
Duke	1-7	3-9

PLAYER TO WATCH

QB Sam Hartman, Jr., Wake Forest: The leader of an offense that ranked fourth in scoring last season returns most of his big weapons, portending another prolific season and maybe a run at the Heisman if the Demon Deacons can again post double-digit wins and reach the ACC title game.

RB Sean Tucker, So, Syracuse: The Orange will need Tucker to repeat his standout season from last fall when he finished sixth in the nation and broke the school's single-season record with 1,496 rushing yards. Don't be surprised if he betters that mark this campaign. He is good enough to nearly carry the Orange back to bowl play on his own.

DL Myles Murphy, Jr, Clemson: Now entering his third season, Murphy is poised to become the dominant force that he was projected to be when he was one of the nation's top recruits. An increase on his seven sacks and 14 tackles for loss should be expected.

LB Drake Thomas, Jr, North Carolina State: The leading tackler for the Wolfpack last season, Thomas, a first-team, all-conference selection will again be expected to make plays in the middle of the defense. He should deliver.

ATLANTIC COAST

ATLANTIC DIVISION

Boston College

2021 record: 6-6, 2-6
Top players: QB Phil Jurkovec, OL Christian Mahogany, DB Josh DeBerry

Jurkovec has the chance to play himself into the first round of the 2023 NFL draft, but only if he can stay healthy. Jurkovec will take snaps behind a re-worked offensive line with one returning starter. That returner, Mahogany, is one of the top interior linemen in the ACC. Zay Flowers should be Jurkovec's top target. The defense has potential with DeBerry and Jaiden Woodbey leading a secondary that helped the Eagles rank third in passing yards allowed.

Clemson

2021 record: 10-3, 6-2
Top players: QB DJ Uiagalelei, DL Tyler Davis, DL Myles Murphy

It was only a year ago that Uiagalelei was listed among the top contenders for the Heisman Trophy. Now after throwing just nine touchdowns in 2021, it's not even certain the junior will remain the team's starter. Uiagalelei will be tested by incoming freshman Cade Klubnik, a five-star recruit. A return to the top of the ACC likely will be powered by a defense that was second in scoring (14.8 ppg), eighth in total defense (310.2 ypg) and produced 42 sacks. Davis and Murphy are standouts on an elite defensive line.

Florida State

2021 record: 5-7, 4-4
Top players: QB Jordan Travis, RB Treshaun Ward, DB Jammie Robinson

The defense looks on paper to be one of the three or four best in the conference. While losing edge rusher and 2021 ACC defensive player of the year Jermaine Johnson II to the NFL draft stings, a rare Football Championship Subdivision transfer has the potential to



Phil Jurkovec, a Notre Dame transfer, has thrown 26 touchdowns and nine interceptions and rushed for eight more touchdowns in his Boston College career. BOB DECHIARA/USA TODAY SPORTS

flourish on the Power Five level. Jared Verse, who came from the University of Albany, and has grabbed a major role at end. Travis became the leader of the offense in the second half as the Seminoles won five of his last seven starts. The offense should continue to get better in Mike Norvell's third season.

Louisville

2021 record: 6-7, 4-4
Top players: QB Malik Cunningham, OL Caleb Chandler; LB Yasir Abdullah

The Cardinals will likely go as far as Cunningham can carry them. He's not Lamar Jackson, but his throwing and running ability make him one of the dynamic players in the league. Central Arkansas transfer Tyler Hudson could be used at wide receiver and as an option in the running game. Abdullah and defensive back Kei'Trel Clark will be the leaders on defense. Should the unit take a step forward there's the possibility of pushing the top of the league af-

ter four of the team's seven losses last season were by seven points or fewer.

North Carolina State

2021 record: 9-3, 6-2
Top players: QB Devin Leary, DL Cory Durden, LB Drake Thomas

The optimism about reaching the school's first ACC title game starts with Leary, who threw for 3,433 yards and 35 touchdowns. A primary ball carrier needs to emerge but Thayer Thomas and Devin Carter give Leary two excellent receiving options. There's talent returning from a defense that finished 14th in points allowed (14.7). Durden and Thomas will be joined by LB Payton Wilson, who miss all but two games last season due to injury.

Syracuse

2021 record: 5-7, 2-6
Top players: RB Sean Tucker, LB Mikel Jones, DB Darian Chestnut

Even as Tucker continued to tack on yardage, the three-game losing streak to end the year showed how defenses could key on the Syracuse running game. Winning six or more games demands more balance on offense, so the focus this offseason is on developing quarterback Garrett Shrader into a more consistent passer. The defense looks to be in good shape with playmakers at all three levels. So there's plenty of pressure on Dino Babels to deliver a bowl berth.

Wake Forest

2021 record: 11-3, 7-1
Top players: QB Sam Hartman, WR A.T. Perry, DL Rondell Bothroyd

The offense that averaged 467.9 yards and 41 points may be even better than it was in 2021, when Hartman keyed a historic season for Dave Clawson. Perry (1,293 yards, 15 touchdowns) and Taylor Morin will again be productive. The dominant theme this offseason is the state of a defense that returns

defensive coordinator Brad Lambert for his second stint with the program. Bothroyd returning after registering eight sacks and 16½ tackles for loss was a big boost but the front must get better against the run. If the offense stays on course, it might not take a huge leap.

COASTAL DIVISION

Duke

2021 record: 3-9, 0-8

Top players: OL Jacob Monk, DL DeWayne Carter, LB Shaka Heyward

The rebuilding job facing new coach Mike Elko is nowhere near what his predecessor, David Cutcliffe, inherited in 2008. But there are still major holes. The quarterback job is up for grabs between Riley Leonard and Jordan Moore. Both lack significant experience. What's more concerning, though, is the state of a defense that ranked last in the country last season in yards allowed (517.9). Most recently the defensive coordinator at Wake Forest, Notre Dame and Texas A&M, Elko will have his hands full.

Georgia Tech

2021 record: 3-9, 2-6

Top players: QB Jeff Sims, WR Malachi Carter, LB Ayinde Eley

With three wins in each of his first three seasons, coach Geoff Collins has yet to deliver anything close to an ACC contender. A reworked coaching staff could give the Yellow Jackets' offense a needed boost; this group was a train wreck in the second half of last year. But the schedule won't help: Georgia Tech draws Clemson from the Atlantic, will face two SEC teams (Mississippi and rival Georgia) and Central Florida in non-conference play, and closes the regular season with four road games in five weeks. Sims has to take a step forward in his third year as starter.

Miami (Fla.)

2021 record: 7-5, 5-3

Top players: QB Tyler van Dyke, RB Jaylan Knighton, DB Tyrique Stevenson

Mario Cristobal won't reverse



One of Pittsburgh's standouts from drills has been junior linebacker Bangally Kamara (left). He is shown with running back Todd Sibley Jr. returning a blocked punt in 2021. CHARLES LECLAIRE/USA TODAY

Miami's direction from the start, though his focus on recruiting, development and an embrace of the program's long-dormant swagger seems like the perfect recipe for the Hurricanes. Van Dyke is the face of the team after a superb freshman year (2,931 yards and 25 touchdowns passing), and rightfully so. Knighton brings a threat on the ground – which is much-needed to take pressure off Van Dyke – and can be a weapon in the passing game. Ultimately, the Hurricanes will contend for the conference championship game only if the pass rush and overall team tackling is far better than in 2021.

North Carolina

2021 record: 6-7, 3-5

Top players: WR Josh Downs, DL Myles Murphy, DB Cam'Ron Kelly

Two main candidates - Jacoby Criswell and Drake Maye - are vying for the opportunity to replace quarterback Sam Howell. The attention paid to the

competition, however, shouldn't have overshadowed concerns at running back and wide receiver. In the backfield, UNC has four options but no clear answer coming out of spring drills. At receiver, there may be a pair of clear starters in Downs and Antoine Green but depth is at a premium. Gene Chizik returns in a second stint as defensive coordinator and he'll be tasked with getting more out of a group that ranked 105th in scoring defense (32.1 ppg).

Pittsburgh

2021 record: 11-3, 7-1

Top players: OL Carter Warren, DL Calijah Kancey, LB Sir-Voceia Dennis

The Panthers will be hard-pressed to repeat their ACC title with some key losses. Southern California transfer quarterback Kedon Slovis will replace Kenny Pickett. The offense, though, needs to find some playmakers. A solid spring has Pittsburgh coaches feeling better about linebacker play. Should this

group be better than expected, the Panthers' defensive line could make this one of the top front sevens in the conference.

Virginia

2021 record: 6-6, 4-4

Top players: QB Brennan Armstrong, WR Dontayvion Wicks, LB Nick Jackson

Longtime Clemson assistant Tony Elliott takes over the solid foundation left by Bronco Mendenhall. He'll also get back Armstrong, who considered his options, and a 1,000-yard receiver in Wicks. What the Cavaliers don't have is anything close to an experienced offensive front. Virginia stepped down to the FCS ranks to grab two potential contributors from Georgetown and Dartmouth. The defense was porous last year and broke down too often. The positive is there's experience in the secondary.

Virginia Tech

2021 record: 6-7, 4-4

CAN'T-MISS GAMES

Tennessee at Pittsburgh, Sept. 10: How good will the Panthers be in their defense of the ACC title? The Volunteers and their high-powered offense will provide an answer in this early matchup that should be one of the more entertaining non-conference games of the season.

Clemson at Wake Forest, Sept. 24: Both teams should enter unbeaten and the winner takes a big step forward in the Atlantic Division race. The Tigers dominated the matchup last year, providing incentive for the Demon Deacons to turn the tables.

North Carolina State at Clemson, Oct. 1: Should the Tigers get past their game the previous week, beating the Wolfpack the following Saturday would put them in the driver's seat on the road the ACC title game. N.C. State, meanwhile, likely must win to have any chance of reaching Charlotte.

North Carolina at Miami, Oct. 8: The opening conference game for the Hurricanes comes in the second month of the season. The Tar Heels could shake up the Coastal Division pecking order by pulling off an upset on the road.

Top players: OL Kaden Moore, LB Dax Hollifield, DB Chamarr Conner

It's been difficult to peg exactly what new coach Brent Pry wants to do on offense. Maybe it would help to know who is going to be the starting quarterback. Transfer Grant Wells (Marshall) and Jason Brown (South Carolina) are competing for the job with Wells having the edge out of spring. Pry's expertise is on defense and rebuilding that group will be his top priority for a program that thrived on that side of the ball before the past few seasons. Connor and Hollifield provide building blocks for a resurgence.

– Erick Smith

PROJECTED RECORDS

By Paul Myerberg
Champion: Ohio State

East	Conf.	Overall
Ohio State	9-0	12-0
Michigan	7-2	10-2
Penn State	6-3	9-3
Michigan State	5-4	8-4
Maryland	3-6	6-6
Rutgers	3-6	5-7
Indiana	1-8	3-9

West

Wisconsin	6-3	9-3
Iowa	6-3	9-3
Nebraska	5-4	7-5
Minnesota	4-5	7-5
Purdue	4-5	7-5
Northwestern	3-6	6-6
Illinois	1-8	3-9

PLAYERS TO WATCH

QB C.J. Stroud, So., Ohio State: The fourth-place finisher in last year's Heisman voting, Stroud should continue to pile up big numbers, though equaling his total yards and touchdowns may be difficult to top even with much of the nation's top-scoring offense returning.

WR Jayden Reed, Sr., Michigan State: Reed compiled 1,026 receiving yards and 10 touchdowns as the Spartans won 10 games in a surprise rebound season. With QB Payton Thorne also returning, expect him to again be one of the top receivers in the conference.

LB Nick Herbig, Jr., Wisconsin: The latest in the long line of linebackers that are the spearheads of the Badgers defense, Herbig had 14½ tackles for loss and a team-high nine sacks last season. He'll be asked to do more with the departures of Leo Chenal and Jack Sanborn at the position.

DB Riley Moss, Sr., Iowa: Moss seems to make his biggest impact when the Hawkeyes' defense is in need of a big play. He had four interceptions last year and earned first-team, all-conference honors. Hawkeyes fans will take comfort in knowing he is patrolling the back of the secondary this season.

BIG TEN

EAST DIVISION

Indiana

2021 record: 2-10, 0-9
Top players: OL Matthew Bedford, LB Cam Jones, DB Tiawan Mullen

Last season's expected breakout campaign never materialized and the Hoosiers are back to the drawing board. Quarterback Connor Bazelak arrives from Missouri and is expected to be the starter and should help improve a paltry offense. After giving up 5.7 yards per snap in Big Ten play, the Hoosiers have overhauled the defensive front seven with six Power Five transfers. Up front, Indiana reeled in a solid starter in California transfer JH Tevis and added depth with Mississippi transfers Patrick Lucas Jr. and LeDarrius Cox.

Maryland

2021 record: 7-6, 3-6
Top players: QB Taulia Tagovailoa, WR Rakim Jarrett, DB Jakorian Bennett

A bowl trip in Mike Locksley's third season was the fruit born off his rebuilding effort. Making consecutive trips seems reasonable. The same starting offensive line from last year's Pinstripe Bowl win returns, and this increased experience up front will help Maryland button up its pass protection. A cleaner pocket should draw even more production out of Tagovailoa, who finished with 3,860 yards in 2021 and will have an even more loaded receiver room at his disposal. Bennett was second among all Power Five players with 13 pass breakups but needs some help in the secondary and up front.

Michigan

2021 record: 12-2, 8-1
Top players: RB Blake Corum, OL Ryan Hayes, DL Mazi Smith

Beat Ohio State. Check. First Big Ten title since 2004. Check. New contract for Jim Harbaugh.



Greg Schiano is 8-14 in his second stint as Rutgers' coach and 76-81 in 13 seasons overall.
RON JOHNSON/USA TODAY SPORTS

Check. Things look very different for the Wolverines after last year's surprise playoff appearance. Now comes the challenge of repeating. Michigan didn't do a deep dive into the transfer portal to rebuild a defense decimated by losses to graduation and the NFL. (Only two of the nine players to record two sacks in 2021 are back.) The offense should open up with Cade McNamara back for his second season as a starter and a receiving corps that welcomes back Ronnie Bell from injury.

Michigan State

2021 record: 11-2, 7-2
Top players: QB Payton Thorne, WR Jayden Reed, LB Cal Haladay

Mel Tucker's second season couldn't have gone much better. Thorne emerged as the productive quarterback the program has been missing and several transfers made an immediate impact. Kenneth Walker arrived from Wake Forest to boost the running game and was an All-

American. This year, the Spartans are bringing two players to replace him – Jalen Berger (Wisconsin) and Jarek Broussard (Colorado). The biggest area of concern is the secondary, which finished dead last in the country in allowing 324.8 yards per game. But all the starters from the back end return.

Ohio State

2021 record: 11-2, 8-1
Top players: QB C.J. Stroud, WR Jaxson Smith-Njigba, DB Ronnie Hickman

Stroud was magnificent in his first year as starter, throwing for 4,435 yards and 44 touchdowns as the Buckeyes ranked No. 1 in scoring average (45.7 points) and total offense per game (561.2 yards). Expect similar fireworks this year. Smith-Njigba is the latest in the line of great Ohio State receivers and RB TreVeyon Henderson went for 1,560 yards and 19 scores (rushing and receiving) as a freshman last season. Where OSU's title run got tripped up

was on defense. The unit broke down against the run in losses to Oregon and Michigan and the secondary was inconsistent. Ryan Day hired Oklahoma State coordinator Jim Knowles to fix things.

Penn State

2021 record: 7-6, 4-5
Top players: QB Sean Clifford, DL PJ Mustipher, DB Ji'Ayir Brown

The stars of a top-ranked recruiting class include five-star running back Nicholas Singleton, who joins Keyvone Lee and Devyn Ford as Penn State looks to beef up last year's non-existent run game. Clifford avoiding errors is critical as the Lions lost five conference games by a combined 21 points. The addition of Western Kentucky transfer receiver Mitchell Tinsley will help the passing game. The defense is one of the Big Ten's best. The pressure is on James Franklin to win most of them after going 11-11 in the past two seasons.

Rutgers

2021 record: 5-8, 2-7

Top players: OL Reggie Sutton, DL Mohamed Toure, DB Avery Young

Last year's team squeezed into the Gator Bowl as a late replacement for Texas A&M. Getting to six or more wins in 2022 will take some improvement at quarterback, with Noah Vedral likely to stick as the starter for the third year in a row. There will also be difficult decisions to be made at running back, where Rutgers is auditioning a big group to replace Isaih Pacheco, and at linebacker, where the defense lost four of last year's leading tacklers.

WEST DIVISION

Illinois

2021 record: 5-7, 4-5

Top players: RB Chase Brown, LB Calvin Hart Jr., DB Sydney Brown

Illinois brings a handful of proven contributors into coach Bret Bielema's second season, including wide receiver Isaiah Williams and running backs Brown, Joshua McCray and Reggie Love III. There will be a new offensive coordinator in former Texas-San Antonio assistant Barry Lunney Jr., and the Illini still have to make a decision at quarterback between Artur Sitkowski and Syracuse transfer Tommy DeVito. The biggest concern is rebuilding the offensive line and generating more offense so that last narrow miss on the postseason can be reversed. Hart's return from injury should give a lift.

Iowa

2021 record: 10-4, 7-2

Top players: TE Sam LaPorta, LB Jack Campbell, DB Riley Moss

Spencer Petras should stick as Iowa's starting quarterback. But the Hawkeyes will take another look this offseason at junior Alex Padilla, who made three starts in 2021. LaPorta led the team with 670 yards receiving and could contend for national honors. While pedestrian quarterback play didn't keep Iowa from adding another West divi-



The formula remains the same for Wisconsin, which relies on Allen, who had 1,286 yards as a freshman last season.

MIKE DE SISTI/MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

sion championship last season, the offense needs more from the position than 6.2 yards per attempt and barely more touchdowns than interceptions. The defense again looks to be among the best in the league.

Minnesota

2021 record: 9-4, 6-3

Top players: QB Tanner Morgan, OL John Michael Schmitz, LB Mariano Sori-Marin

The offensive front brings back just one starter in Schmitz, but coach P.J. Fleck added a pair of high-impact transfers in Quinn Carroll (Notre Dame) and

Chuck Filiaga (Michigan). The defense was quietly outstanding last year and hopes that transfers Darnell Jefferies (Clemson) and Lorenza Surgers (Vanderbilt) can fill some holes on the line. Morgan returns after 10 touchdown passes, though he threw 30 in 2019. Mohamed Ibrahim, who went down in the season opener, was one of three running backs lost for the season. The group will be one of the best in the conference.

Nebraska

2021 record: 3-9, 1-8

Top players: DL Ochaun Ma-

this, LB Garrett Nelson, RB Jaquez Yant

An overdue staff shake-up has led to a change in direction on offense. After reworking his contract on the heels of a three-win finish, coach Scott Frost has given most of the control over the offense to new coordinator Mark Whipple. Taylor Martinez transferred, so Nebraska added both Casey Thompson (Texas) and Chubba Purdy (Florida State) as quarterback transfers. Mathis arrives from TCU and should provide a big boost to the defense, which was good enough to keep Nebraska in games against elite competition last year before falling short.

Northwestern

2021 record: 3-9, 1-8

Top players: RB Evan Hull, OL Peter Skoronski, DL Adetomiwa Adebawore

They've alternated Big Ten title game appearances and three-win seasons the past four years. Uneven play at quarterback again plagued the offense and the competition is between Ryan Hilinski and Brendan Sullivan. Hull produced a thousand-yard season on the ground. With just one established pass rusher in Adebawore, the Wildcats looked to the portal to beef up last year's sad pass rush and run defense. The secondary returns some key veterans.

Purdue

2021 record: 9-4, 6-3

Top players: QB Aidan O'Connell, WR Milton Wright, DL Branson Deen

Unlike previous seasons, there is no debate about the starting quarterback. O'Connell sparked a nine-win season by throwing 21 touchdowns against just three interceptions in Purdue's last six games. More will be needed from a running game that averaged just 2.8 yards per carry and just 84.2 yards per game. Most of the starters from last year's strong defense return.

Wisconsin

2021 record: 9-4, 6-3

Top players: RB Braelon Al-

CAN'T-MISS GAMES

Notre Dame at Ohio State, Sept. 3: Having two of the sport's biggest programs coming together under the lights at Ohio Stadium is not a bad kickoff to the football season. Despite their geographic proximity, the schools last met in the regular season in 1996, though they have played twice in the Fiesta Bowl since that matchup.

Penn State at Michigan, Oct. 15: If the Nittany Lions want to show the past two seasons were a blip rather than a downward trend, then going to the Big House and beating the Wolverines would make a statement. This should be another close game between two of the top contenders in the East Division.

Wisconsin at Iowa, Nov. 12: The battle for the Big Ten West seems to be in the balance for either or both teams when the Badgers and Hawkeyes meet up and this season should be no exception. Wisconsin had dominated the recent history between the teams, winning eight of the last 10.

Michigan at Ohio State, Nov. 26: As if the biggest rivalry in the Big Ten didn't need any more fuel to the fire, the Wolverines dominated the game last season for their first victory in the series since 2011. The Buckeyes will have revenge in mind in a game that could have conference and playoff ramifications.

len, OL Tyler Beach, LB Nick Herbig

They rely on the running game and defense – which ranked first in the country in allowing 239.1 yards per game. Improved play from QB Graham Mertz, despite an inexperienced receiving corps, is necessary. The defense took hits, but Jay Shaw joins from UCLA after second-team All-Pac-12 honors. Fellow transfer CB Cedrick Dort made 25 starts at Kentucky.

– Erick Smith

PROJECTED RECORDS

By Paul Myerberg
Champion: Oklahoma

	Conf.	Overall
Oklahoma	7-2	10-2
Baylor	7-2	9-3
Oklahoma State	6-3	9-3
Kansas State	5-4	8-4
Texas	5-4	7-5
Iowa State	4-5	6-6
Texas Tech	4-5	5-7
TCU	3-6	6-6
West Virginia	2-7	4-8
Kansas	2-7	4-8

PLAYERS TO WATCH

QB Dillon Gabriel, Jr., Oklahoma: The Sooners are overhauling their offense and with Gabriel’s prior relationship with coordinator Jeff Lebby, there’s optimism in Norman he can be as impactful as he was at Central Florida (8,037 yards and 70 touchdowns in 26 games) and overcome the loss of Lincoln Riley and Caleb Williams.

RB Bijan Robinson, Jr., Texas: The biggest weapon for the Longhorns should get a heavy workload this season after rushing for 1,127 yards and 11 touchdowns. His breakaway ability makes him a scoring threat every time he has the ball.

DL Will McDonald, Sr., Iowa State: Offensive lineman and quarterbacks will not relish the return of McDonald, who has tied for the Big 12 lead in sacks for two consecutive campaigns. He had 11½ last year, breaking his own single-season school record

DB Tre’Vius Hodges-Tomlinson, Sr., TCU: A first-team Big 12 selection last season, Tomlinson decided to pass on the NFL and the transfer portal and stick with the Horned Frogs. He routinely matches up with the opponent’s best receiver and holds his own.

BIG 12

Baylor

2021 record: 12-2, 7-2
Top players: OL Connor Galvin, DL Siaki Ika, LB Dillon Doyle

Blake Shapen won the quarterback job, prompting the transfer of Gerry Bohanon, who was the starter for most of last season. Shapen isn’t the runner that Bohanon is, but his passing ability should open up the offense. With most of the offensive line returning, the focus will be sorting out significant departures at running back and receiver. The defense lost two stars in Jalen Pitre and Terrel Bernard - both high NFL draft picks - but there’s lots of talent returning, especially up front. Don’t be surprised if they’re back in the Big 12 championship game with the physical approach of Dave Aranda continuing to play dividends.

Iowa State

2021 record: 7-6, 5-4
Top players: WR Xavier Hutchinson, DL Will McDonald IV, DB Anthony Johnson

The Cyclones were in the pre-season top 10 last year but a magical season never materialized and now most of the key elements of that group have moved on. Matt Campbell’s name was tossed around for some high-profile jobs, but he ultimately stayed and now is tasked with a significant rebuild. Hutchinson and McDonald are two of the best players at their position in the conference. The question is how the rest of the team performs. Success on offense likely will hinge on how well Hunter Dekkers adjusts at quarterback as the successor to Brock Purdy. The running game needs somrone to emerge with the departure of Breece Hall. The defense is in good hands with coordinator Jon Heacock.

Kansas

2021 record: 2-10, 1-8
Top players: QB Jalon Daniels, RB Devin Neal, DB Kenny



Will McDonald IV has 29 sacks in 36 games at Iowa State, according to Sports-Reference.com.
BEN QUEEN/USA TODAY SPORTS

Logan Jr.

Given that Lance Leipold arrived without the benefit of running spring practices, the Jayhawks performed admirably in his first season and there is hope that finally a foundation is being built to move the program forward. A dramatic win at Texas and near loss to Oklahoma showed that improvement is coming sooner than expected. Daniels led an offensive resurgence after taking over at quarterback last season. He needs to build on that momentum this fall. Neal, who had 707 yards as a freshman should get even better this season. Leipold aggressively courted transfers and brought in several newcomers who could charge up the defense.

Kansas State

2021 record: 8-5, 4-5
Top players: RB Deuce Vaughn, OL Cooper Beebe, DL Felix Anudike-Uzomah
The arrival of Nebraska transfer quarterback Adrian

Martinez paired with Vaughn gives the Wildcats needed punch that was lacking at times last season. Martinez, however, isn’t the only new arrival. Kansas State went to the transfer portal to fill several holes on defense. Anudike-Uzomah should continue to wreck havoc on quarterbacks after totaling 11 sacks last season. Daniel Green headlines the linebacking group after leading the team with 89 tackles and 16 tackles for loss. This group was close to knocking on the door of the top of the league last season. If the pieces fall right, the Wildcats could break through this season.

Oklahoma

2021 record: 11-2, 7-2
Top players: QB Dillon Gabriel, WR Marvin Mims, DL Jalen Redmond
Applying conventional wisdom, there would be an expectation that the Sooners would take a step back after losing their coach and several players, including quarterback Caleb

Williams, to the transfer portal. Venables, however, is bringing a fresh approach, especially on defense, that has been embraced by the holdovers. A Central Florida transfer, Gabriel steps in behind center with former Mississippi coordinator Jeff Lebby leading the offense. Mims should have a breakout season, but the running game must improve. Brent Venables was the architect of Clemson’s title-winning defenses. LB DaShaun White and DB Woodi Washington are other key pieces in making a run at the College Football Playoff.

Oklahoma State

2021 record: 12-2, 8-1
Top players: QB Spencer Sanders, DL Collin Oliver, WR Brennan Presley
The Cowboys are in great shape if experience at quarterback can guarantee a successful season. Sanders is back for his fourth year as the team’s starter. Presley should emerge as his top target. The offense does



New TCU coach Sonny Dykes, with wife Kate, went 30-18 at SMU and has gone 71-63 overall as a Division I head coach.

KEVIN JAIRAJ/USA TODAY SPORTS

need someone to step forward at running back. The biggest concerns, however, are on defense with coordinator Jim Knowles off to Ohio State and Derek Mason replacing him. The core of last year's outstanding unit is gone and there will be growing pains. Oliver had a fantastic freshman season and should be a pass-rushing threat along with Brock Martin. But the secondary needs rebuilding to produce another run at the conference title game.

Texas

2021 record: 5-7, 3-6

Top players: RB Bijan Robinson, WR Xavier Worthy, LB DeMarvion Overshown

The Longhorns lost six games in a row in the middle of Steve Sarkisian's debut season, including an epic meltdown against Oklahoma, and missed out on a bowl game for the third

time in seven seasons. Quinn Ewers is being heralded as the savior, but the freshman quarterback still is a work in progress. He's still competing with Hudson Card for the starting job. Robinson and Worthy give Sarkisian two of the best offensive weapons in the league, but the offensive line has to get better. The defense also needs to step forward after allowing 30 points or more in all seven losses and more than 200 yards rushing per game.

TCU

2021 record: 5-7, 3-6

Top players: WR Quentin Johnson, OL Steve Avila, DB Tre'Vius Hodges-Tomlinson

There's a new look in Fort Worth with Gary Patterson's departure after more than 20 years on the sideline. Sonny Dykes moves across the Metroplex from SMU with his high-pow-

ered offense that should provide a needed refresh on that side of the ball. A battle between Max Duggan and Chandler Morris is ongoing at quarterback. Johnson, one of the top receivers in the Big 12, will be a key component of the passing game for whomever wins the job. The defense slumped badly and needs improvements. The biggest area of concern is up front after the Horned Frogs allowed 222 yards per game rushing. This might be the most exciting team in the conference with some prolific shootouts expected.

Texas Tech

2021 record: 7-6, 3-6

Top players: RB Tahj Brooks, WR Myles Price, DB Dadrion Taylor-Demerson

Even with firing their coach, the Red Raiders were just one of five Big 12 teams to finish with a winning record last season. The

hiring of Joey McGuire, who arrives after an assistant stint at Baylor and a successful run as a high school coach in Texas, has generated excitement within the team and the recruiting trail. Tyler Shough and Donovan Smith will be competing for the quarterback job, giving the team two solid options. Brooks and Price are two quality pieces coming back. As has been the case in recent years, Tech's performance will be dictated by its defense. New coordinator Tim DeRuyter is tasked with bringing that group up to speed.

West Virginia

2021 record: 6-7, 4-5

Top players: WR Bryce Ford-Wheaton, OL Zach Frazier, DL Dante Stills.

Neal Brown will be expected to produce more in his fourth season, as expectations are higher than just reaching the

CAN'T-MISS GAMES

Baylor at Brigham Young, Sept. 10: This one is an early litmus test for the Bears to determine whether this year's group is capable of contending for another Big 12 title. The Cougars bring back most of their team from last year and are a dark horse playoff contender.

Oklahoma vs. Texas, Dallas, Oct. 8: It's going to be hard to top last year's thrilling comeback by the Sooners in a game that set a series-record points 103 scored. But this matchup inside the State Fair of Texas never disappoints due to the passion of both sides.

Kansas State at Iowa State, Oct. 8: If there's going to be an unlikely contender making a run at the conference title game, the Wildcats or Cyclones might be the best bet. This matchup has the potential to propel one of them into the mix if the pieces come together.

Oklahoma State at Oklahoma, Nov. 19: The penultimate weekend of the regular season brings together the two Bedlam rivals for a game that could be decisive in determining who makes the Big 12 championship game. The Cowboys ended the Sooners' run of six consecutive titles last year. OU will be looking for revenge this year.

postseason. The arrival of Georgia transfer JT Daniels should bring stability to the quarterback position that was lacking in the past couple of seasons. The only concern is how quickly Daniels can get connected with Ford-Wheaton and the other receivers after arriving this summer. Lyn-J Dixon from Clemson may solve a vacancy at running back, so there's potential to produce points. Stills anchors a defensive line that should be one of the best in the conference. If the secondary gets sorted out, this could be a sneaky dark horse contender.

— Erick Smith

PROJECTED RECORDS

By Paul Myerberg
Champion: Alabama-Birmingham
Conf. Overall

Alabama-Birmingham	7-1	9-3
Texas San-Antonio	6-2	7-5
Western Kentucky	6-2	9-3
North Texas	5-3	7-5
Middle Tennessee	4-4	6-6
Florida Atlantic	4-4	5-7
Rice	4-4	5-7
Charlotte	3-5	4-8
UTEP	3-5	4-8
Louisiana Tech	1-7	3-9
Florida International	1-7	3-0

PLAYERS TO WATCH

RB DeWayne McBride, Jr., UAB: The 5-foot-11, 215-pounder plays on what should once again be one of the best teams in the conference; another step forward isn't out of the question for McBride.

WR Zakhari Franklin, Sr., UTSA: Franklin is one of two returning Conference USA wide-outs to surpass the thousand-yard threshold, joining Tyrese Chambers at FIU. An excellent athlete at 6-foot-1, 185, Franklin will benefit from continuity at the quarterback position with Frank Harris.

DE Praise Amaewhule, Jr., UTEP: Amaewhule has been getting into C-USA backfields consistently over the last four seasons, culminating in a first-team all-conference showing in 2021. He posted 13 tackles for loss and 5.5 sacks and forced three fumbles. The 6-foot-3, 245-pound presence is bound to be a force once again in 2022.

QB Gavin Hardison, Jr., UTEP: At the very least, football fans can expect entertainment from the UTEP signal-caller, who returns for a third season at the helm of the offense. Hardison also struggled with turnovers, throwing 13 interceptions. If he can bring that total down, he'll be one of the conference's most effective players.

CONFERENCE USA

Alabama-Birmingham

2021 record: 9-4, 6-2
Top players: RB DeWayne McBride, S Grayson Cash, WR Trea Shropshire

A narrow favorite among the bookmakers during the spring to win the conference, UAB took a huge blow when head coach Bill Clark announced his retirement due to persistent back problems. Clark placed a recommendation to university brass that offensive coordinator and interim head coach Bryant Vincent be allowed to see out the season. Whether that happens or not, it will be difficult to replace the presence of Clark, who helped resurrect the program. The Blazers brought in Baylor transfer quarterback Jacob Zenno to compete with last season's starter, Dylan Hopkins, who threw for 2,274 yards and 18 touchdowns a year ago. Crucially, the Blazers also return C-USA's most efficient rusher from a year ago, McBride.

Charlotte

2021 record: 5-7, 3-5
Top players: QB Chris Reynolds, WR Grant DuBose, DE Markees Watts

Entering last season's bye week following a win over FIU on October 8, Charlotte sat at 4-2 with a win over Duke on its ledger. The 49ers went 1-5 thereafter and missed out on bowl eligibility. Entering its eighth season at the FBS level and its fourth year under head coach Will Healy, Charlotte has an early objective to overcome that negative momentum. The 49ers return Reynolds, who threw for 2,709 yards, 26 touchdowns and nine interceptions last season. On the defensive side of the ball, Greg Brown takes over for Brandon Cooper as defensive coordinator. The 49ers are looking to improve on a defense that surrendered 34 points per game in 2021.

Florida International

2021 record: 1-11, 0-8



Zakhari Franklin, a thousand-yard receiver in 2021, returns to a UTSA team that won the C-USA. He should become one of the most fearsome targets in the Group of Five. TIM HEITMAN/USA TODAY SPORTS

Top players: WR Tyrese Chambers, DT Davon Strickland, QB Gunnar Holmberg

Not much went right for FIU in 2021, with a third consecutive losing season leading to the departure of head coach Butch Davis – but not before controversy was sparked when the university posted his job midseason. Mike MacIntyre takes over a team that went 1-11 last season and gave up the most points per game in the conference at 39.7. The former Colorado and San Jose State coach spent the last two seasons as the defensive coordinator at Memphis. He succeeded in landing some intriguing transfers over the off-season, headlined by Holmberg, who started for Duke last season.

Florida Atlantic

2021 record: 5-7, 3-5
Top players: RB Johnny Ford, DT Evan Anderson, S Teja Young
Head coach Willie Taggart and the Owls come into 2022

with five former Seminoles on the roster, the former Florida State coach evidently still exerting some pull three years after his departure. A third consecutive bowl game eluded FAU last season after the Owls lost each of their final four games by at least two scores to fall one win shy of six. FAU struggled to score down the stretch, falling short of the 20-point threshold in each of those four defeats. The Owls will turn to a new play-caller this time around after the appointment of offensive coordinator Brent Dearmon, who led an effective Middle Tennessee State offense last season.

Louisiana Tech

2021 record: 3-9, 2-6
Top players: LB Tyler Grubbs, WR Smoke Harris, WR Tre Harris
Among the head coaches in last season's Conference USA, only Middle Tennessee State's Rick Stockstill had held his job for longer than Louisiana Tech's

Skip Holtz, who was subsequently fired after a 3-9 showing. The Bulldogs hired former TCU and Texas Tech offensive coordinator Sonny Cumbie to replace him. Cumbie helmed plenty of high-octane offenses with the Red Raiders and Horned Frogs, and it will be interesting to see whether he can ignite what was a relatively average Bulldog offense in 2021. Defense is arguably the bigger concern for Louisiana Tech, though, after it surrendered 34 points per game last season. New defensive coordinator Scott Power, who helped turn around the defense at FCS Stephen F. Austin, will look to repeat that feat with the Bulldogs.

Middle Tennessee State

2021 record: 7-6, 4-4
Top players: DE Jordan Ferguson, OL Jordan Palmer, WR Jaylin Lane
Middle Tennessee State went to its sixth bowl game in the last nine seasons in 2021, despite a season-ending injury

to quarterback Chase Cunningham, who threw for 1,318 yards, 16 scores and three interceptions in eight games. Redshirt freshman Nicholas Vattiato replaced him, going 3-2 down the stretch while accumulating 1,047 yards, seven scores and six interceptions. With Cunningham still recovering this spring, Vattiato has received positive reviews from the MTSU coaching staff. The Blue Raiders lost offensive coordinator Brent Dearmon to FAU, and replaced him with Mitch Stewart. An advocate for a high-tempo approach, Stewart spent the last two seasons calling plays at Samford, leading an offense that ranked sixth in scoring among FCS programs in 2021.

North Texas

2021 record: 6-7, 5-3

Top players: OL Manase Mose, RB Oscar Adaway III, WR Roderic Burns

North Texas' 2021 season was just about dead at 1-6. But somehow, North Texas turned it around, salvaging bowl eligibility by ripping off five consecutive victories to close the regular season, including a 45-23 drubbing of No. 15 UTSA. Seth Littrell's team lost its bowl matchup, but avoided disaster. Littrell won nine games with the Mean Green in 2017 and 2018, but has endured three consecutive losing seasons since. Memphis transfer Grant Gunnell enters the fold at quarterback, where the Mean Green received an inefficient performance from Austin Anne a season ago. They'll also be boosted by the return of Adaway III, who rushed for 5.8 yards per carry in 2020 before suffering an ACL injury last season.

Rice

2021 record: 4-8, 3-5

Top players: OL Shea Baker, DE Ikenna Enechukwu, RB Ari Broussard

Remove a 48-point outburst against FCS foe Texas Southern and Rice managed 19.1 points per game against FBS opposition in 2021. That's not going to be enough if the Owls – who haven't been to a bowl game since 2014 – want to see pro-



UAB's DeWayne McBride averaged 6.7 yards on 204 carries in 2021. There were only four running backs throughout college football who were more efficient than him. PETRE THOMAS/USA TODAY SPORTS

gress. The defense wasn't great either, surrendering 36.2 points per contest, which ranked as the second-most in the conference. Rice looks to be adding solid pieces in the transfer portal. Sam Crawford, who accumulated 472 receiving yards at Tulsa last season, is making the move. Former West Virginia wideout Isaiah Esdale, Notre Dame safety Litchfield Ajavon and Rutgers linebacker Chris Conti are all also committed to joining the fray in Houston.

Texas-El Paso

2021 record: 7-6, 4-4

Top players: DE Praise Amaewhule, QB Gavin Hardison, LB Breon Hayward

After combining for five wins over his first three seasons in El Paso, Dana Dimel brought the Miners to their first bowl game since 2014 last season, finishing with a 7-6 record. Remarkably, he achieved that with the fourth-worst turnover differential in the country at -11. With a little bit more turnover luck, there's reason to believe that

there's even more potential for growth at UTEP, after the Miners posted the second-best defense and seventh-best offense from a total yardage perspective last season. They bring back Praise Amaewhule, a first-team all-conference defensive end from a season ago, as well as Hardison, who threw for 3,218 yards last season, the most passing yards of any CUSA returner.

Texas-San Antonio

2021 record: 12-2, 8-1

Top players: QB Frank Harris, WR Zakhari Franklin, OL Ahofitu Maka

In his second season at the helm, Jeff Traylor brought UTSA to its first FBS conference title in 2021. The Roadrunners won their first 11 games, winning road games against Illinois and Memphis along the way as they ascended as high as 15th in the AP Poll. UTSA will need to replace four of its six first-team all-conference players from a year ago, including running back Sincere McCormick, who

rushed for 1,479 yards. Still, the Roadrunners have to be among the favorites to win Conference USA for a second season running. Quarterback Frank Harris, a 3,000-yard passer last season, returns for another go. An influx of Power Five transfer talent should help, too.

Western Kentucky

2021 record: 9-5, 7-2

Top players: OL Quantavious Leslie, TE Joey Beljan, QB Jarret Doege

Only two programs in college football averaged more yards per play against FBS competition in 2021 than Western Kentucky: Ohio State and Coastal Carolina. But the mind behind that success, Zach Kittley, now resides in Lubbock, having made the move to Texas Tech over the offseason. Head coach Tyson Helton opted to replace Kittley from within. Ben Arbuckle and Josh Crawford both carry co-offensive coordinator labels into the new season. The Hilltoppers must also find a replacement for quarterback Bai-

CAN'T-MISS GAMES

Texas-San Antonio at Texas, Sept. 17: The Roadrunners, fresh off a 12-win season, take the trip to Austin for a clash with Texas under the lights. UTSA collected wins against teams in the Big Ten and the American Athletic Conference last season, and it will be eyeing up a big-time statement against the Longhorns.

Western Kentucky at Indiana, Sept. 17: The Hilltoppers and Hoosiers played an entertaining contest in Bowling Green last season that the Hoosiers won narrowly. Western Kentucky makes the return trip to Bloomington this year for what should be another competitive affair.

Texas-San Antonio at Alabama-Birmingham, Nov. 5: This game could have massive implications on the Conference USA title. Two of the preseason favorites to win the championship – and the only programs to win the conference title in the last four years – clash after UTSA won a 34-31 thriller last year.

Alabama-Birmingham at Western Kentucky, Oct. 21: The owners of C-USA's best defense in 2021 travel to meet the conference's best offense from a season ago. More than just an interesting clash of strengths, this midseason matchup could go a long way toward shaping the conference title race.

ley Zappe, who threw for an astounding 5,967 yards last season -- over 1,000 more than the owner of the nation's second-highest passing total, Bryce Young. Doege, who threw for over 2,500 yards at West Virginia in each of the last two seasons, comes in as the presumptive replacement.

– David Eckert,
The Hattiesburg (Miss.)
American

PROJECTED RECORDS

By Paul Myerberg

Champion: Central Michigan

East	Conf.	Overall
Miami (Ohio)	5-3	6-6
Kent State	5-3	6-6
Ohio	4-4	6-6
Buffalo	3-5	5-7
Bowling Green	2-6	3-9
Akron	1-7	2-10
West	Conf.	Overall
Central Michigan	6-2	8-4
Toledo	5-3	7-5
Northern Illinois	5-3	7-5
Western Michigan	5-3	7-5
Eastern Michigan	4-4	6-6
Ball State	3-5	6-6

PLAYERS TO WATCH

QB Brett Gabbert, Jr., Miami: Gabbert threw for 2,648 yards along with 26 touchdowns and only six interceptions in 2021, helping place his team second in the MAC East Division.

RB Lew Nichols III, So., Central Michigan: Nichols led all of college football in rushing yards (1,848) and carries (341). The reigning MAC offensive player of the year carried his team to a 9-4 record and a win in the Sun Bowl in 2021.

LB James Patterson, Sr., Buffalo: Patterson's 116 total tackles in 2021 ranked him third in the MAC in tackles and earned him first-team All-MAC honors, in addition to 13 tackles for loss and 4.5 sacks.

DE Jamal Hines, Sr., Toledo: The Rockets had the fourth best total defense in 2021, due in large part to Hines. Hines' 10 sacks in 2021 were second among all MAC players. He also had eight defended. Hines' versatility in run and pass defense will make him a front-runner for MAC defensive player of the year.

MID-AMERICAN

EAST DIVISION

Akron

2021 record: 2-10, 1-7**Top players:** LB Bubba Arslanian, TE Tristian Brank, RB Jonzell Norrills

Akron dropped its final six games, getting outscored 242-110. First-year head coach Joe Moorhead is tasked with bringing Akron back to relevance after four abysmal seasons since the Zips' last bowl appearance. After finishing with the third-worst total offense and worst total defense in the MAC, expectations are low but fans should look for growth and development as the season progresses.

Bowling Green

2021 record: 4-8, 2-6**Top players:** CB Davon Ferguson, LB Darren Anders, DL Karl Brooks

A few things will have to go right for the Falcons to reach a bowl game for the first time in seven seasons. The offense will have to take a step up from second to last in the MAC. That progression starts with QB Matt McDonald (2,555 yards and 12 touchdowns). He's getting back his top receivers in Tyrone Broden and Austen Osborne while RBs Terion Stewart, Nick Mosley and Jaison Patterson will all look to build off of their solid freshman campaigns. CB Davon Ferguson's return will lead to some big plays. DE Karl Brooks, who led the team in sacks, is returning alongside linebackers Anders and Brock Horne, who led the team in tackles last year.

Buffalo

2021 record: 4-8, 2-6**Top players:** LB James Patterson, DL Daymond Williams, WR Quian Williams

The Bulls disappointed last season (Year 2 of coach Maurice Linguist's tenure) following a 6-12-20. With no Dylan McDuffie to lead the run-heavy offense, the Bulls will look to Ron Cook Jr., who had 440 rushing



Miami QB Brett Gabbert is poised for a strong junior season following a 26-touchdown sophomore year. TIM HEITMAN/USA TODAY SPORTS

yards last year, to carry the load. Senior Matt Myers will take over at quarterback after Kyle Vantrease transferred to Georgia Southern. Patterson, the leading tackler, will return alongside Shaun Dolac and defensive tackle Daymond Williams. Both will be needed in a run defense that allowed almost 200 rushing yards per game last year. The secondary will be getting a boost from Notre Dame transfer Caleb Offord, Florida's Elijah Blades and Boston College's Jahmin Muse.

Kent State

2021 record: 7-7, 6-2**Top players:** WR Dante Cephas, RB Marquez Cooper, S Dean Clark

The reigning MAC East champions will look to repeat their success without MAC Quarterback of the Year Dustin Crum. Collin Schlee is taking over the helm, and he'll look to put up similar production as the

2021 MAC Quarterback of the year. He'll have help though, from Cephas, a first-team All-MAC receiver, and second-team RB Marquez Cooper. The defense finished second to last in the conference in points allowed per game in 2021. Safety Dean Clark (116 tackles) should help. Junior defensive lineman CJ West will look to build upon his four sacks in 2021.

Miami (Ohio)

2021 record: 7-6, 5-3**Top players:** QB Brett Gabbert, LB Ty Wise, DB Matthew Salopek

Miami will be vying for a MAC East title and potentially a MAC championship. WR Mac Hippenhammer, who was second in receiving yards for Miami last year returns along with four of the five starters on one of the best offensive lines in the nation last year. RBs Keyon Mozee, Kevin Davis and Kenny Tracy are all returning as well after

combining for more than 1,200 yards and 10 touchdowns. The defense will have big holes to fill with the departure of 2021 sacks leader Lonnie Phelps off to Kansas and leading tackler Ivan Pace Jr. headed to Cincinnati. Matthew Salopek will spend time playing both cornerback and linebacker this season after having the second-most tackles for the RedHawks last year. Miami adds transfer in LB Ty Wise (Indiana) and DT Corey Suttle (Iowa State).

Ohio

2021 record: 3-9, 3-5**Top players:** WR Cameron Odom, LB Bryce Houston, S Tariq Drake

Four of the Bobcats' nine losses were decided within 11 points or fewer. Ohio's defense regressed, giving up 432 total yards and 239 passing yards on average last year, after a strong showing in 2020. Returning LBs Bryce Houston and Cannon

Blauser led team in tackles. The defensive line will be getting a boost from Purdue transfer Dontay Hunter II. Drake led the team in interceptions (3) and S Alvin Floyd led all defensive backs in tackles (62). QB Kurtis Rourke will have to take a big step this season and cut down on the turnovers for Ohio to compete with the other offenses in the MAC.

WEST DIVISION

Ball State

2021 record: 6-7, 4-4

Top players: LB Clayton Coll, RB Carson Steele, DE Tavion Woodward

Though redshirt senior QB John Paddock has had little experience under center, his four years within the system should help. RB Carson Steele should take a lot of the pressure off of Paddock after rushing for 891 yards and six touchdowns in 2021. WRs Jayson Jackson and Yo'Heinz Tyler combined for more than 1,300 receiving yards and 11 touchdowns last year. Losing safeties Bryce Cosby and J.T. Wahee is a serious blow to the secondary. Malcolm Lee will step into a larger role. The line-backer group lost the lead tackler Jaylin Thomas, but Clayton Coll should be able to fill that production after finishing third in tackles last year. Tavion Woodward and Jack Sape (six combined sacks) should make a huge impact on the defensive line.

Central Michigan

2021 record: 9-4, 6-2

Top players: RB Lew Nichols III, WR Dallas Dixon, C Jamezz Kimbrough

QB Daniel Richardson threw 24 touchdowns in 2021. But tackles Luke Goedeke and Bernhard Raimann were selected in this year's NFL draft. The passing game took a hit this off-season too with WR Kalil Pimpleton, who led the team with 960 yards, declared for the NFL. WR Dallas Dixon had 701 yards and eight touchdowns last season. Central Michigan will need new playmakers on the back end. On the front end, Justin Whiteside, John Wesley Whiteside and



Central Michigan's Lew Nichols III is returning for his sophomore season after leading the nation in rushing yards last year. GABY VELASQUEZ/EL PASO TIMES

Kyle Moretti lead a pass rush that was fourth in sacks and led the nation in tackles for loss last year.

Eastern Michigan

2021 record: 7-6, 4-4

Top players: WR Hassan Beydoun, WR Dylan Drummond, DL Jose Ramirez

With Ben Bryant going back to Cincinnati and Preston Hutchinson going to Chattanooga, who steps up in camp to take charge of the Eagles' offense? It could be Taylor Powell, Cam'Ron McCoy or DJ Smith. WRs Beydoun and Drummond combined for more than 1,700 yards and 10 touchdowns last year. The Eagles will also look for a new work horse in the running game with the team's 2021 leading rusher Jawon Hamilton gone. Samson Evans and Darius Boone Jr. combined for 19 touchdowns on the ground last year. The defensive line starts with Jose Ramirez (6.5 sacks, 12 tackles for loss, four passes defended in 2021). Linebacker Tariq Speights, who led the team in tackles last year, will need help after Terry Myrick was drafted into the USFL. Cornerback Kempton Shine put up 47 tackles and three passes defended in 2021.

Northern Illinois

2021 record: 9-5, 6-2

Top players: CB Jordan Gandy Jr., WR Trayvon Rudolph, S CJ Brown

The Huskies were four yards short of a bowl game win this season. But the MAC champions lost leading rusher Jevyon Ducker (transfer, Memphis), a huge blow to the country's fourth-best running game. Antario Brown and Harrison Waylee who combined for more than 1,000 rushing yards last year. Second-Team All-MAC receiver Trayvon Rudolph returns alongside FIU transfer Shemar Thornton. The biggest question mark will be the defense, which gave up the second-most yards and third-most points per game in the MAC in 2021. The secondary has shown hope though, led by Brown, who was everywhere on the field last season. CB Jordan Gandy Jr. had 10 passes defended and safety Jordan Hansen had 58 tackles.

Toledo

2021 record: 7-6, 5-3

Top players: LB Jamal Hines, S Maxen Hook, WR Devin Maddox

The offense will look different with leading rusher Bryant

Koback off to the Minnesota Vikings. Koback rushed for 1,400 yards last season. Micah Kelly (5.3 yards/carry) will look to step in. Dual-threat quarterback DeQuan Finn will also be dangerous as a runner after rushing for 500 yards and nine touchdowns to complement his 2,067 passing yards and 18 touchdowns in 2021. Most starters on defense return, including linebacker Jamal Hines and safety Maxen Hook, which means high expectations for a defense that was third best in the MAC in yards given up last year.

Western Michigan

2021 record: 8-5, 4-4

Top players: QB Kaleb Eleby, RB Sean Tyler, LB Ryan Selig

Western Michigan's defense took the next step and finished first in least yards given up and second in rushing yards given up. This trend led to a winning season and bowl game appearance. A one-point loss to Eastern Michigan and a 12-point loss to Central Michigan were the difference between Western Michigan winning the MAC West Division title. The division should prove competitive once again. QB Kaleb Eleby returns after a strong 2021 (3,277 pass-

CAN'T-MISS GAMES

Kent State at Miami (Ohio), Oct. 8: When these two met last year that decided the MAC East Division champion, it ended in a shootout with the Flashes holding off the RedHawks 48-47 in overtime. Miami's Brett Gabbert didn't disappoint, passing for 405 yards and four touchdowns.

Eastern Michigan at Western Michigan, Oct. 8: The Eagles came back from down 21-9 to beat the Broncos 22-21 last season. The Michigan rivalry should prove to be an early test for two teams that should be a threat to contend in the MAC West.

Central Michigan at Northern Illinois, Nov. 2: This was another battle that ended in a one-point difference last season. The Huskies beat the Chippewas 39-38 behind Rocky Lombardi's 348 yards passing and three touchdowns and a Huskies 26-yard field goal with under a minute left in the fourth quarter. For Central Michigan, Lew Nichols III ran for 192 yards and two touchdowns.

Ohio vs. Miami (Ohio), Nov. 8: The oldest rivalry in the MAC should prove to have another good matchup this year. Ohio beat Miami 35-33 in 2021 after a late effort by the RedHawks proved not to be enough. The game was a great showcase for the quarterbacks, with Kurtis Rourke putting up 289 and three touchdowns and Gabbert going for 492 yards and five touchdowns. Both quarterbacks are returning this season and for a game that could dictate the MAC East.

ing yards, 23 touchdowns). The run game should look to be strong again with Sean Tyler (1,150 rushing yards) returning. Junior WR Corey Crooms (768 yards) should look to step into the WR1 role with Skyy Moore gone.

— Kaleb Anderson

PROJECTED RECORDS

By Paul Myerberg
Champion: Boise State

Mountain	Conf.	Overall
Boise State	7-1	10-2
Air Force	6-2	9-3
Utah State	5-3	7-5
Wyoming	4-4	6-6
Colorado State	2-6	4-8
New Mexico	1-7	3-9

West

Fresno State	6-2	9-3
San Diego State	6-2	9-3
San Jose State	5-3	7-5
Nevada	3-5	6-6
Hawaii	2-6	3-9
UNLV	1-7	2-10

PLAYERS TO WATCH

QB Jake Haener, Sr., Fresno State: The return of coach Jeff Tedford to Fresno was enough to convince Haener to exit the transfer portal and return to the program. He broke the 4,000-yard barrier last season (4,096) and had 33 touchdowns against nine interceptions.

DE Dom Peterson, Sr., Nevada: The Wolf Pack's man in the middle returns for a fifth season, this time as unquestionably the anchor of Nevada's defense. Peterson is always moving forward, which has played a role in his relatively light career tackling numbers (150), but also his high totals in both tackles for loss (41.5) and sacks (22).

RB Brad Roberts, Sr., Air Force: The Falcons can run by committee if needed, but they are even more dangerous when a featured back can handle most of the load. Roberts, coming off a breakthrough season (1,356 yards, 13 TDs), fits that role perfectly for the nation's top rushing offense (327.7 ypg).

LB Caden McDonald, Sr., San Diego State: Defense is usually what gets it done at SDSU, and now it's McDonald who looks set to take over the unit's leadership role.

MOUNTAIN WEST

MOUNTAIN DIVISION

Air Force

2021 record: 10-3, 6-2
Top players: RB Brad Roberts, LB Vince Sanford, OL Isaac Cochran

Despite opposing defenses knowing what was coming, Air Force fielded the nation's best rushing attack (327.7 ypg) for the second straight season. Running back Brad Roberts (1,356 yards) is the primary threat, but quarterback Haaziq Daniels (734 yards) is also a capable runner. He also averaged 11.4 yards per completion. The backbone on defense is linebacker Vince Sanford, whose 59 tackles included 17 for loss.

Boise State

2021 record: 7-5, 5-3
Top players: OL John Ojukwu, DB JL Skinner, QB Hank Bachmeier

Boise State competing for Mountain Division titles and playing in the MW championship game has become a familiar site in the conference, but the Broncos were overshadowed by both Utah State and Air Force last season. The run game — on both sides of the ball — was the big issue, with Boise State rushing for just 120.4 ypg (110th nationally) while giving up 157.5 ypg (75th) on the defensive side. Running back George Holani (569 yards) will hope to appear in more than nine games, and All-MW lineman John Ojukwu returns for a sixth year in the program.

Colorado State

2021 record: 3-9, 2-6
Top players: WR Melquan Stovall, OL Jacob Gardner, LB Dequan Jackson

The biggest offseason shockwave in the conference came with former Nevada coach Jay Norvell's sudden departure to conference rival Colorado State. He also convinced 11 Wolf Pack players to follow him, with many from that group looking



Offensive lineman John Ojukwu is in his sixth year in the program and has 37 starts with Boise State. LOREN ORR GETTY IMAGES

like they'll form the nucleus of the 2022 Rams, especially on offense. Ex-Nevada standouts Melquan Stovall (56 receptions) and Tory Horton (52) are impact receivers who should help CSU make a big jump up from its 23.7 ppg last season. Clay Millen, stuck behind Carson Strong at Nevada, looks like the QB of the future.

New Mexico

2021 record: 3-9, 1-7
Top players: DB Jerrick Reed II, P Aaron Rodriguez, DL Jake Saltonstall

It's tough to win while scoring 12.2 points per game, as New Mexico found out the hard way in 2021. After starting off 2-0, the Lobos never scored more than 17 points in their final 10 games — and those 17 came in a loss. The offense simply must

get better, and UNM is hoping a second straight transfer quarterback — this time, Kansas' Miles Kendrick — will be part of the answer. A revamped and very young line will need to mature quickly. The defense is in better shape, particularly with leading tackler Jerrick Reed II (89 stops) returning.

Utah State

2021 record: 11-3, 6-2
Top players: OL Alfred Edwards III, QB Logan Bonner, RB Calvin Tyler Jr.

There was no better story in the Mountain West last season than Utah State, which turned a disastrous 1-5 campaign in 2021 into a divisional title, a conference championship, and a spot in the first LA Bowl. For second-year coach Blake Anderson to lead a repeat performance,

quarterback Logan Bonner (3,628 yards, 36 TDs) will need to back up his numbers from a year ago. Four returners on the line should help. There are questions on the defensive side, where five starters return for a USU unit that gave up a lot of yards (392.7 ypg).

Wyoming

2021 record: 7-6, 2-6
Top players: RB Titus Swen, DL Cole Godbout, LB Easton Gibbs

Wyoming was hit particularly hard by players jumping into the transfer portal, a group that included former QB Levi Williams, who went to Utah State. In a strange turn of events, though, USU backup quarterback Andrew Peasley (130 career attempts) joined the Cowboys and is expected to be Wyo-

ming's 2022 starter. There's not a lot of experience to be found elsewhere, with the Cowboys returning just eight starters. Defensive lineman Cole Godbout (70 tackles) will at least be a solid anchor for the defense.

WEST DIVISION

Fresno State

2021 record: 10-3, 6-2

Top players: QB Jake Haener, WR Jalen Cropper, DB Evan Williams

Fresno State is used to competing for Mountain West titles, but the Bulldogs' last West Division championship came in 2018. That could change this season, as returning coach Jeff Tedford (26-14 in his first stint) has a high-powered offense at his disposal. Jake Haener (4,096 passing yards) returns to pilot a passing attack that also features Jalen Cropper (85 catches, 11 TDs). There's also seven returning starters on defense, and USC transfer Raymond Scott adds depth at linebacker.

Hawaii

2021 record: 6-7, 3-5

Top players: DL Blessman Ta'ala, K Matthew Shipley, OL Ilm Manning

Players in the transfer portal, a roster without a notable strength, and a coach not hired until January — there's no shortage of issues on the island. Former Hawaii QB hero Timmy Chang (17,072 passing yards from 2000-2004) inherits a mess; he's expected to begin his work on the offensive side, where at least lineman Ilm Manning and tight end Caleb Phillips return. Kicker Matthew Shipley can handle field goals as well as punts, and he might be the Warriors' biggest positive heading into fall camp.

Nevada

2021 record: 8-5, 5-3

Top players: DL Dom Peterson, OL Aaron Frost, RB Toa Taua

Nevada is looking at a daunting rebuild following the losses of coach Jay Norvell (to Colorado State), two-time MW player



With receivers such as Jalen Cropper (85 catches) available, Jake Haener and Fresno State look poised to light up the scoreboard. TROY BABBITT/USA TODAY SPORTS

of the year Carson Strong and 20 transfers. New coach Ken Wilson, a former Wolf Pack assistant, might have to rely on defense to be competitive; lineman Dom Peterson (34 career TFL) is a great place to start. On the other side, the Pack will rely heavily on featured back Toa Taua (732 yards). Oklahoma State transfer Shane Illingworth should battle bowl-game starter Nate Cox for the QB job.

San Diego State

2021 record: 12-2, 7-1

Top players: LB Caden McDonald, DL Keshawn Banks, WR Jesse Matthews

SDSU has typically combined great defense with enough-to-get-by offense over the past few seasons, with 2022

looking like it could be more of the same. The Aztecs return six starters from the nation's 12th-ranked defense (and third-ranked against the run), including first-team All-MW players Caden McDonald (LB) and Patrick McMorris (DB). McDonald had 49 tackles (6.5 for loss) last season. After stops at Oregon and Virginia Tech, QB Braxton Burmeister will take a shot at improving a weak passing offense (167.9 ypg).

San Jose State

2021 record: 5-7, 3-5

Top players: LB Kyle Harmon, DL Viliami Fehoko, WR Elijah Cooks

San Jose State followed up its feel-good run to the 2020 MW title with a step back last sea-

son, closing the year with three straight losses to miss out on bowl eligibility. The Spartans look poised for a return to a winning record — if, perhaps, not another MW title — thanks to a nice blend of veterans and transfers. Former MW player of the year Cade Hall returns to the defensive line, which also features Viliami Fehoko. Hawaii transfer Chevan Cordeiro (2,793 yards) gives SJSU at dual threat at QB.

UNLV

2021 record: 2-10, 2-6

Top players: CB Nohl Williams, OL Leif Fautanu, K Daniel Gutierrez

UNLV has yet to show much in coach Marcus Arroyo's first two seasons, which have added

CAN'T-MISS GAMES

Fresno State at Southern Cal, Sept. 17: The MWC has other opportunities for statement non-conference wins, but the Bulldogs' trip to Los Angeles looks to be the most winnable. Fresno State is loaded and the conference favorite; there will not be a better time to knock off a national brand.

Colorado State at Nevada, Oct. 7: A cross-division matchup between non-favorites wouldn't normally be noteworthy, but feelings will be running high in Reno. Ten days after beating CSU last year, Nevada coach Jay Norvell bolted for Fort Collins — and ended up taking nearly a dozen players with him.

San Diego State at Fresno State, Oct. 29: With San Jose State appearing to have too many question marks, this meeting between the Aztecs and the Bulldogs should settle the West Division. The teams have combined for seven divisional titles since the MWC split in 2013 (four for Fresno State).

Utah State at Boise State, Nov. 25: Air Force is likely to make the Mountain Division a three-team race, but the Aggies and Broncos could very well be settling the title on the final week-end of the regular season. Boise State has won 18 of the last 20 between the teams.

up to a 2-16 record and empty seats at Allegiant Stadium. Defense has been a culprit, with UNLV giving up 32.8 ppg last year (107th nationally), including 51 to Nevada and 40 or more in two other losses. The unit returns two starters apiece up front, at linebacker and in the secondary. WR Kyle Williams (601 yards) gives the offense potential for big plays. Who will end up throwing him the ball — there are three viable candidates — is more of a mystery.

— Duke Ritenhouse,
Reno Gazette-Journal

PROJECTED RECORDS

By Paul Myerberg
Champion: Utah

	Conf.	Overall
Utah	8-1	10-2
Oregon	7-2	9-3
UCLA	6-3	9-3
Southern California	6-3	8-4
Washington	6-3	8-4
Oregon State	5-4	7-5
California	3-6	5-7
Washington State	3-6	5-7
Arizona State	3-6	5-7
Stanford	3-6	4-8
Arizona	2-7	3-9
Colorado	2-7	2-10

PLAYERS TO WATCH

RB Zach Charbonnet, Jr., UCLA: Charbonnet seemed to fit Chip Kelly’s offense perfectly in his first season after transferring from Michigan. He piled up 1,137 yards and 15 touchdowns as the leader of the team’s ground attack. Those numbers should only go up this season.

OL Jaxson Kirkland, Sr., Washington: Kirkland declared for the NFL draft before ankle surgery and an appeal to the NCAA allowed him to return to the Huskies. Washington’s gain is a loss for the rest of the league, which now must face the dominant left tackle.

LB Noah Sewell, So., Oregon: The one constant for the Ducks’ defense that was beset by injuries last year was Sewell. He led the team and was second in the conference with 114 tackles, while also adding four sacks and an interception. Sewell again will be in the middle of everything for Oregon.

DB Clark Phillips III, So., Utah: There are secondary concerns for the Utes, but those concerns don’t involve Phillips. The sophomore led the Pac-12 with 13 pass breakups last year and should be matched with the opponent’s top receiver each week. His impact may only be minimized if teams avoid him.

PAC-12

Arizona

2021 record: 1-11, 1-8
Top players: WR Jacob Cowing, DL Kyon Barrs, DB Christian Young
Coming off a one-win season in Jedd Fisch’s debut might seem like a reason for gloom and doom. But the Wildcats got better throughout the campaign and Fisch then landed an impressive recruiting class and some impact transfers. Among the key additions are quarterback Jayden de Laura, who started the past two seasons at Washington State, Cowing from Texas-El Paso (1,354 yards and seven touchdowns) and Southern California defensive lineman Hunter Echols. Another possible impact comes from wide receiver recruit Tetairoa McMillan. Arizona will start with low expectations; don’t be surprised if it exceeds them.

Arizona State

2021 record: 8-5, 6-3
Top players: OL LaDarius Henderson, LB Merlin Robertson, KR D.J. Taylor
With a veteran team returning, last season ended with disappointment. The loss of quarterback Jayden Daniels to LSU was one of the surprise departures in the aftermath of the campaign. The Sun Devils rebounded with the late addition of Emory Jones from Florida. Trenton Bourguet and Alabama transfer Paul Tyson are also among the competitors for the job. Yet wide receiver and the secondary are lacking in experience and talent. And there’s the lingering NCAA investigation into the program looming. Herm Edwards is going to need some magic to put all the pieces together to compete for the conference title.

California

2021 record: 5-7, 4-5
Top players: RB Damien Moore, LB Jackson Sirmon, DB Daniel Scott
The arrival of former Purdue



Linebacker Noah Sewell, the brother of former Oregon standout and first-round pick and offensive lineman Penei Sewell, has recorded 15 tackles for loss in two seasons. CHRIS PIETSCH/THE REGISTER-GUARD

quarterback Jack Plummer provides some hope for an offense that needs to carry its weight for the Golden Bears. Moore inherits the role as the top ballcarrier and could produce big numbers, though there are holes to fill at the receiver position. Like in most seasons under Justin Wilcox, the defense should be one of the best in the conference and keep the Bears in most of their games. Sirmon arrives after leading Washington in tackles last season. Scott, a sixth-year returnee, is one of the best safeties in the conference and had a team-high 82 tackles for the Golden Bears along with three interceptions.

Colorado
2021 record: 4-8, 3-6
Top players: WR R.J. Sneed II, LB Quinn Perry, DB Isaiah Lewis.
Changes were needed after the Buffaloes were statistically among the worst in the FBS. Karl Dorrell brought in offensive coordinator Mike Sanford in his

overhaul of assistants. Also joining the program is Tennessee quarterback transfer J.T. ShROUT, who will compete with Brendon Lewis, the team’s starter as a freshman last year. Baylor transfer Sneed brings some needed speed and a veteran presence after several departures at the position. While the passing game was poor, the running game needs a primary ball carrier to emerge. The situation is better on defense, though overall there needs to be improvement to get into postseason consideration.

Oregon
2021 record: 10-4, 7-2
Top players: OL Alex Forsyth, DL Brandon Dorlus, LB Noah Sewell
The first issue new coach Dan Lanning must address is figuring out who is his starting quarterback. Bo Nix transfers in from Auburn after three rollercoaster seasons and will compete with Ty Thompson, who redshirted after joining the pro-

gram as one of the nation’s top recruits. Lanning’s second task will be sorting out the defense. That might be a more comfortable endeavor as he built one of the country’s elite units at Georgia. Sewell and Justin Flowe have the makings of a standout linebacker duo if the latter can stay healthy after two injury-plagued seasons. The one area Oregon will be able to count on is offensive line, where most of last year’s starting group returns and should pave the way for a strong running game.

Oregon State
2021 record: 7-6, 5-4
Top players: QB Chance Nolan, LB Omar Speights, DB Jaydon Grant
The Beavers are a contender for the Pac-12 title? The answer is a simple yes as Jonathan Smith has been building up his team without much fanfare. Oregon State broke through with a bowl appearance last season and was the only team in the league to beat eventual

champion Utah. The strength of the team will again be its running game with holdover DeShaun Fenwick becoming the top threat. Chance Nolan is back at quarterback and his development along with a veteran offensive line could make this one of the league's best offenses. There's room for improvement on defense with several key contributors returning. A rough early schedule awaits, though.

Southern California

2021 record: 4-8, 3-6

Top players: QB Caleb Williams, WR Jordan Addison, DL Tuli Tuipulotu

There's talk about the Trojans possibly being playoff contenders or winning the Pac-12 in Lincoln Riley's first season. But there are major concerns on both sides of the ball after last year's team imploded. Williams showed moments of brilliance and inexperience as a freshman at Oklahoma. Joining him are more than a dozen other transfers, including running back Travis Dye from Oregon and Biletnikoff winner Addison from Pittsburgh. There are problems to address on the offensive line and throughout the defense.

Stanford

2021 record: 3-9, 2-7

Top players: QB Tanner McKee, OL Branson Bragg, DB Kyu Blu Kelly

Each of David Shaw's first three seasons ended with at least 11 victories. The past three seasons, the Cardinal have 11 victories combined. Such is the state of the program that was once annually a conference title contender and now is squarely in the bottom half of the league. After respective finishes of 122nd and 114th in total offense and defense last year, there are lots of areas to address. The good news is that McKee is among the many holdovers on offense and there's some young talent on defense. Kelly and Kendall Williamson are building blocks in the secondary.

UCLA

2021 record: 8-4, 6-3

Top players: QB Dorian



Clark Phillips III led the Pac-12 with 13 pass breakups last season. He also had two interceptions.

SEAN M. HAFEEY/GETTY IMAGES

Thompson-Robinson, RB Zach Charbonnet, LB Darius Muasau

The decision by Thompson-Robinson to return as a super senior gives coach Chip Kelly his best chance of winning the Pac-12 since taking over the Bruins in 2018. Alongside a veteran quarterback is all-conference running back Charbonnet, providing UCLA two of the league's top offensive talents. Rebuilding the receiving group is Kelly's biggest challenge on offense. Duke transfer Jake Bobo will help. The transfer portal was also used to address needs on the defensive line and there's experience in the back seven. Muasau was Hawaii's top tackler the past two seasons. The secondary must be better after the Bruins allowed an average of 40 points in their four losses last season.

Utah

2021 record: 10-4, 8-1

Top players: QB Cameron Rising, RB Tavion Thomas, DB Clark Phillips III

Kyle Whittingham's decision to promote Rising to starting quarterback turned last season around for the Utes after a 1-2 start. It ended with a conference title and memorable shootout loss to Ohio State in the Rose Bowl. Rising returns with running back Thomas, who had 21 touchdowns on the ground. Tight end Brant Kuithe was the team's leading receiver and position mate Dalton Kincaid was right behind him. The defense again will be strong up front with Florida transfer Mahmoud Diabate slotting in at linebacker and filling a big need. The biggest worry is the secondary that was torched by the Buckeyes. Phillips needs help.

Washington

2021 record: 4-8, 3-6

Top players: OL Jaxson Kirk-

land, DL Tuli Letuligasenoa, LB Edefuan Ulofoshio

The first task for incoming coach Kalen DeBoer is solving the offensive issues that have plagued the program in recent seasons. The Huskies managed just under 22 points per game and brought in Indiana transfer Michael Penix Jr. to compete at quarterback with last year's starter Dylan Morris and heralded redshirt freshman Sam Huard. The running game is also a work in progress, though Kirkland's surprise return helps. That means much of the pressure for success is going to rest on the defense.

Washington State

2021 record: 7-6, 6-3

Top players: WR De'Zhaun Stribling, LB Daiyan Henley, DL Ron Stone Jr.

Jake Dickert split six games after being promoted from defensive coordinator to interim

CAN'T-MISS GAMES

Utah at Florida, Sept. 3:

Are the Utes for real and capable of making a run at the College Football Playoff? We won't have to wait long to find out with their opener against the Gators sure to be a toasty one in the Swamp. A win by Utah would surely get everyone to take notice.

Southern California at Oregon State, Sept. 24:

Yes, this will be an early indicator of how Lincoln Riley and his offense will handle a tough road trip in the Pac-12. But it's also an opportunity for the Beavers to show they're ready to contend for the conference title game.

Washington at UCLA, Sept. 30:

An important early clash between two of the biggest names in the Pac-12. The Huskies desperately want to re-establish themselves after an awful 2021-12. There's no better opportunity than against the Bruins, who have their sights set on winning the league for the first time since 1998.

Utah at Oregon, Nov. 19:

The same scenario as last year could unfold when the Utes and Ducks met late in the regular season and then again in the Pac-12 title game. But there's also the potential with the league no longer using divisions that this could be an elimination matchup. Oregon has the added motivation of try to erase those two embarrassing defeats.

coach, helping the Cougars finish second in the North. Cameron Ward transferred in from Incarnate Word to fill the quarterback vacancy and his playmaking will be part of a new offense installed this spring that will focus less on passing than the previous regimes. Dickert's defense last year made strides and if it can continue that ascension then Washington State has the opportunity for a high finish.

— Erick Smith

PROJECTED RECORDS

By Paul Myerberg
Champion: Alabama

East	Conf.	Overall
Georgia	7-1	11-1
Kentucky	5-3	9-3
Tennessee	5-3	8-4
Florida	4-4	7-5
Missouri	3-5	6-6
South Carolina	3-5	6-6
Vanderbilt	0-8	3-9

West

Alabama	8-0	12-0
Texas A&M	6-2	10-2
Mississippi	4-4	8-4
Arkansas	4-4	7-5
LSU	4-4	8-4
Mississippi State	3-5	7-5
Auburn	2-6	5-7

PLAYERS TO WATCH

QB Bryce Young, Jr., Alabama: Young put up staggering numbers – 4,872 yards and 47 touchdown passes – and walked away with the Heisman Trophy in his first year as a starter. Even with his receiving group weaker, he'll still be incredibly productive while keeping the Crimson Tide in title contention.

RB Chris Rodriguez Jr., Sr., Kentucky: Rodriguez's style resembles a bowling ball, using his 5-11, 224-pound frame to punish opponents. He was a first-team, all-conference selection after rushing for 1,379 yards. Things could open up more for him with the passing game improved.

DL Jalen Carter, Jr., Georgia: Carter was overshadowed last year as one of a deep group of Bulldogs up front. With three of his teammates leaving as NFL first-round picks, more recognition should come his way and he'll likely join them in being taking high in next year's draft.

LB Bumper Pool, Sr., Arkansas: The primary job of a linebacker is to stop the guy with the football. Pool understands the assignment. He has 320 tackles during the last three seasons and will add to that total as the center of the Razorbacks defense.

SOUTHEASTERN

EAST DIVISION

Florida

2021 record: 6-7, 2-6
Top players: QB Anthony Richardson, DL Gervon Dexter, LB Brenton Cox Jr.

The revolving door that is the Florida coach job turned again when the school parted ways with Dan Mullen after four seasons. Billy Napier arrives from Louisiana- Lafayette with the task of revitalizing the Gators. Richardson seems set at quarterback after sharing time last season. His big-play ability will be needed. Among three players that followed Napier is running back Montrell Johnson, who join a unit with potential. The defense showed improvement but was still below the typical standard for the program.

Georgia

2021 record: 14-1, 8-0
Top players: TE Brock Bowers, DL Jalen Carter, LB Nolan Smith

Quarterback uncertainty loomed until Stetson Bennett decided to return, causing JT Daniels to transfer and pushing off the battle between backups Carson Beck and Brock Vandagriff. Running back looks strong with Kendall Milton and Kenny McIntosh taking over duties. Bowers is a star at tight end and the offensive line looks promising. The losses are huge on defense, especially in the front seven. Watching the NFL draft highlighted that. However, Kirby Smart has plenty of elite recruits waiting to step in to join stars Carter and Smith.

Kentucky

2021 record: 10-3, 5-3
Top players: QB Will Levis, RB Chris Rodriguez Jr., LB DeAndre Square

Mark Stoops just quietly wins at one of the toughest places to succeed in the Southeastern Conference. This year will be different because the Wildcats have greater expecta-



Chris Rodriguez Jr. rushed for nearly 1,400 yards last season in 13 games with Kentucky. JASEN VINLOVE/USA TODAY SPORTS

tions. Much of the optimism starts with the return of quarterback Levis, who threw for 24 touchdowns and ran for another nine scores. Rodriguez was an all-conference performer, but there's losses at offensive line and receiver that are concerns. Stoops has produced strong defenses throughout his nine-year tenure. There were some big hits on the defensive line and secondary but expect the group to again be one of the SEC's better units.

Missouri

2021 record: 6-7, 3-5
Top players: OL Javon Foster, DL Isaiah McGuire, DB Martez Manuel

There is much to be optimistic about as the Tigers enter the third year of the Eliah Drinkwitz era. Many key contributors are back from last year's bowl team return and there's promising additions arriving. Five-star prospect Luther Burden III enrolled early, and if the spring was any indication, the fresh-

man wide receiver is headed for a major role. The question is who will be throwing him the ball. Brady Cook started the team's bowl game and competed with Tyler Macon in the spring. Mississippi State transfer Jack Abraham and freshman Sam Horn join this summer. Two other major concerns are finding a running back - Stanford transfer Nathaniel Peat is an option - and shoring up a porous defense.

South Carolina

2021 record: 7-6, 3-5
Top players: QB Spencer Rattler, WR Josh Vann, DB Cam Smith

After ranking 13th in the conference in yards per play in 2021, it was a remarkable achievement that first-year coach Shane Beamer squeezed out seven wins and a bowl berth from the season. The Gamecocks dipped into the portal to overhaul a sputtering offense. The biggest pull is Oklahoma transfer Rattler, who represents

a major upgrade at the position. The Gamecocks also added young receiver talents in Antwane Wells Jr. (James Madison) and Corey Rucker (Arkansas State) and brought in Wake Forest transfer running back Christian Beal-Smith (604 yards in 2021). On defense, the front seven must improve after allowing 175 yards per game.

Tennessee

2021 record: 7-6, 4-4
Top players: QB Hendon Hooker, WR Cedric Tillman, DL Byron Young

It was quite a debut season for Josh Heupel after a late takeover and a boatload of losses in the transfer portal. He found a quarterback in Hooker from Virginia Tech to lead his prolific offense and took the Volunteers to a surprise bowl berth. More wins are expected this year. Tillman should again rack up big numbers. The offensive line has most of its starters back. Clearly, scoring won't be the problem. It's the defense that needs to get better after allowing 421.7 yards per game. The biggest challenge is the secondary that was near the bottom of all schools in the Bowl Subdivision.

Vanderbilt

2021 record: 2-10, 0-8
Top players: WR Will Sheppard, LB Anfernee Orji, DB Jaylen Mahoney

The Commodores are still in the early stages of a rebuilding project under second-year coach Clark Lea. A solid recruiting class sparked some off-season optimism and indicated that Lea may eventually cobble together a roster with the talent and depth to factor into the bowl mix. Still unresolved is competition at quarterback and there's major question marks around the state of the offensive line. Orji is one of several starters back on defense. Improvement with that group - which allowed 35.6 points per game - could make Vanderbilt more competitive.

WEST DIVISION

Alabama

2021 record: 13-2, 7-1

Top players: QB Bryce Young, LB Will Anderson Jr., DB Jordan Battle

Heisman Trophy winning quarterback (Young)? Check. Best defensive player in the country (Anderson)? Check. Incoming impact transfers? Check. So while the losses at wide receiver, running back and offensive line provide some pause about this season, Alabama remains the favorite in the SEC and the College Football Playoff race. Among the impact newcomers to watch are cornerback Eli Ricks of LSU, Jermaine Burton — the second-leading wide receiver on Georgia's title team last fall — and running back Jahmyr Gibbs, who joins from Georgia Tech after ranking third in all-purpose yards last year.

Arkansas

2021 record: 9-4, 4-4

Top players: QB KJ Jefferson, LB Bumper Pool, DB Jalen Catalon

The Razorbacks have gone from a program that had won one conference game during the previous three years to winning seven in Sam Pittman's first two seasons. KJ Jefferson will again be the focal point of the offense after leading the team in running and passing. He will be working behind a mostly veteran offensive line. While Pool is the star on defense, the secondary will again be the backbone of the defense with Catalon and Myles Slusher leading the way. Better play against the run is critical to better the nine wins from last year.

Auburn

2021 record: 6-7, 3-5

Top players: RB Tank Bigsby, DL Derick Hall, DB Colby Wooden

To say Bryan Harsin's first year with the Tigers was bumpy would be an understatement. The school launched an investigation into the handling of the program before announcing he



Bumper Pool had 7.5 tackles for loss in 13 games for Arkansas last season.

MICHAEL WOODS/AP

would be retained. But what's left is an unsettling situation for the future. The quarterback competition remains unresolved with four players in the mix: T.J. Finley, who threw six touchdowns last season; Oregon transfer Robby Ashford, a two-sport freshman who didn't take a snap for the Ducks; Texas A&M transfer Zach Calzada, who is battling a shoulder injury; and freshman Holden Gerinier. The good news? Most of the starting offensive line and Bigsby (1,099 yards rushing) are back along some defensive standouts.

LSU

2021 record: 6-7, 3-5

Top players: WR Kayshon Boutte, DL Maason Smith, DL BJ Ojulari.

After more than a decade at Notre Dame, Brian Kelly is sure to find out that expectations and pressure to win with the Tigers are a completely different animal. Kelly has the fewest starters returning to the league, so the portal was a natural opportunity to fill spots. Jayden Daniels arrives from Arizona State to compete with Myles

Brennan and Garrett Nussmeier at quarterback. Boutte will partner with RBs John Emery Jr. and Noah Cain, a Penn State transfer, to give the offense promise at the skill positions. The defense added defensive backs Jarrick Bernard-Converse (Oklahoma State) and Greg Brooks Jr. (Arkansas).

Mississippi

2021 record: 10-3, 6-2

Top players: RB Zach Evans, WR Jonathan Mingo, DB Otis Reese.

The loss of quarterback Matt Corral has the potential to derail the Rebels' growth under Lane Kiffin. Replacing Corral will come down to the competition between Southern California transfer Jaxson Dart and former backup Luke Altmyer. Kiffin aggressively courted players on both sides of the ball from the transfer portal. Evans (TCU) brings an elite threat to the running game, while Jaylon Robinson (Central Florida) will pair well with Mingo. LB Troy Brown (Central Michigan) and DB Ish-eem Young (Iowa State) should help on defense.

Mississippi State

2021 record: 7-6, 4-4

Top players: QB Will Rogers, WR Jaden Walley, DB Emmanuel Forbes

The offense looks to be in good hands with Rogers entering his third year as a starter. This season could see him become the leader that can push the Bulldogs higher in the West. The skill positions look promising with Walley and both leading rushers returning. The defense was unheralded last year despite being 30th in total defense and 12th in run defense. The biggest challenge to making a breakthrough is a schedule that includes Kentucky and Georgia from the East.

Texas A&M

2021 record: 8-4, 4-4

Top players: RB Devon Achane, LB Edgerrin Cooper, DB Antonio Johnson

Even with a defeat of Alabama, the Aggies still had a disappointing campaign that started with the loss of quarterback Haynes King in the opener and saw them fail to threaten the top of the division. Spring didn't

CAN'T-MISS GAMES

Georgia vs. Oregon, Atlanta, Sept. 3: The Bulldogs don't get an easy first step after winning their first national title in 41 years. The Ducks, one of the favorites in the Pac-12, stunned Ohio State on the road last year. They have the talent to pull another shocker if Georgia isn't 100% focused.

LSU at Auburn, Oct. 1: Unrest at Auburn has Bryan Harsin placed firmly on the hot seat. Meanwhile, Brian Kelly needs to establish credibility in his first season at LSU after arriving from Notre Dame. There's a lot on the line for two teams that need to turn things around this fall after disappointing seasons.

Texas A&M at Alabama, Oct. 8: This game was already poised to be the biggest in the SEC before the verbal warfare between Nick Saban and Jimbo Fisher erupted in public during the offseason. Add in the Crimson Tide are looking for revenge after last year's loss to the Aggies and you have a clash full of animosity with conference title and playoff implications.

Florida vs. Georgia, Jacksonville, Oct. 29: The annual showdown between the border rivals will have a new look with Billy Napier on the sideline for the Gators. The winner of this matchup has appeared in the last seven SEC title games. Look for the trend to repeat this year.

provide an answer at quarterback. King, LSU transfer Max Johnson and freshman Connor Wiegman all remain in the mix. The skill positions appear set with Achane and WR Ainius Smith among the expected leaders. The defense is full of talented recruits that are short on experience - especially up front. Skeptics will remain until A&M finally breaks through and reaches double-figure wins.

— Erick Smith

PROJECTED RECORDS

By Paul Myerberg
Champion: Appalachian State

East	Conf.	Overall
Appalachian State	7-1	9-3
Coastal Carolina	6-2	9-3
Georgia State	5-3	6-6
James Madison	4-4	5-6
Marshall	3-5	6-6
Old Dominion	3-5	4-8
Georgia Southern	2-6	4-8
West		
Louisiana-Lafayette	6-2	9-3
Troy	6-2	7-5
Texas State	4-4	6-6
South Alabama	4-4	5-7
Southern Mississippi	3-5	5-7
Arkansas State	2-6	4-8
Louisiana-Monroe	1-7	2-10

PLAYERS TO WATCH

QB Todd Centeio, Gr., James Madison: The Colorado State transfer threw for 2,958 yards for 15 touchdowns. The 6-foot-1 dual threat ran the ball for 437 yards and two touchdowns.

TE Zack Kuntz, R-Jr., Old Dominion: Kuntz was the top tight end in Conference USA, landing him All-CUSA first-team honors. He had 692 yards in 73 receptions for five touchdowns in 2021. The 6-foot-8 target has the potential to be one of the top performing tight ends in the conference.

LB Carlton Martial, Sr., Troy: Martial led the Trojans and Sun Belt conference in total tackles. He finished the 2021 season ranked sixth in the nation with 127 total tackles. The 5-foot-9 defender enters his final year of eligibility with Troy Football as a 2021 Burlsworth Trophy Finalist (awarded to the most outstanding player who began his career as a walk-on) and All-American honorable mention.

QB Grayson McCall, Jr., Coastal Carolina: The 6-foot-3 McCall has been one of the top Sun Belt players since his performance during the 2020 campaign. Last season, he completed 176 passes for 2,873 yards and 27 touchdowns and rushed for 290 yards for four TDs.

SUN BELT

EAST DIVISION

Appalachian State

2021 record: 10-4, 7-1
Top players: QB Chase Brice, DB Steven Jones Jr., RB Nate Noel

App State reasserted its dominance in 2021, finishing with the second-best total offense in Sun Belt, making quick work of conference teams excluding Louisiana-Lafayette. Head coach Shawn Clark has been able to keep the Mountaineers on top in his two seasons, but they lost some of their top guys going into 2022. D'Marco Jackson, the Sun Belt defensive player of the year, was drafted by the New Orleans Saints in the fifth round in 2022.

Coastal Carolina

2021 record: 11-2, 6-2
Top players: LB Silas Kelly, QB Grayson McCall, RB Sher-mari Jones

A fairy tale 2020 and an almost better 2021 for Coastal Carolina was led by McCall. But the Chanticleers are still missing one thing – their own conference championship. They had to share the title with Louisiana-Lafayette in 2020 and fell short behind the champion Ragin' Cajuns in 2021. Given that chip on their shoulder and with McCall, Kelly and Jones (1,040 rushing yards, 13 touchdowns) coming back to Coastal, they will surely make noise in the conference.

Georgia Southern

2021 record: 3-9, 2-6
Top players: RB Gerald Green, WR Khaleb Hood, DB Anthony Wilson

Four games into the 2021 season Chad Lunsford was relieved of his head coaching duties. Cornerbacks coach Kevin Whitley was then named interim head coach to finish the season and the Eagles went 2-6 under him. In December, Clay Helton took over after seven seasons (46-24) at the University of



Quarterback Grayson McCall was the Sun Belt's player of the year for the second year in a row.
MATT PENDLETON/USA TODAY SPORTS

Southern California. He is bringing multiple top 25 and bowl wins to Georgia Southern as he takes on the program transformation project. Helton established himself as a top recruiter at USC.

Georgia State

2021 record: 8-5, 6-2
Top players: RB Tucker Gregg, S Antavious Lane, DB Quavian White

Shawn Elliott has brought success to Georgia State football but despite four winning seasons in four seasons and four bowl games, the Panthers can't seem to break through as conference champions. In the East, three new contenders arise and having to go through Coastal Carolina and Appalachian State to get to the title game has already proved to be a challenge for the Panthers.

James Madison

2021 record: 12-2, 7-1 (as FCS school)

Top players: QB Todd Centeio, RB Latrelle Palmer, WR Kris Thornton

JMU is known among the FCS as a force, winning the 2016 national championship. As one of the new additions to the Sun Belt Conference, the Dukes have the responsibility to prove that they can move into the FBS level and complete at a high level. However, James Madison is making this transition without some of its top players from the 2021 season such as quarterback and Colonial Athletic Association offensive player of the year Cole Johnson, wide receiver Antwane Wells Jr. and line-backer Diamonte Tucker-Dorsey. They gain Centeio, a Colorado State transfer.

Marshall

2021 record: 7-6, 5-3 (in Conference USA)
Top players: RB Rasheen Ali, LB Abraham Beauplan, DB Steven Gilmore

Although they are new to the conference, the Thundering

Herd know what they're going up against in the Sun Belt. Last fall they got a taste during the regular season and the playoffs. Taking on Appalachian State and losing 31-30 proves Marshall can keep up, however the Herd lost to Louisiana-Lafayette 36-21 in the New Orleans Bowl.

Old Dominion

2021 record: 6-7, 5-3 (in Conference USA)
Top players: LB Ryan Henry, TE Zack Kuntz, RB Blake Watson

Ricky Rahne took over after a 1-11 season in 2019 and, in his first year on the field, improved Old Dominion to a 6-7 record and bowl game. Rahne, a former Penn State assistant, has brought life back into Monarch football. With a new conference on the horizon, the Monarchs will either continue their success or succumb to the pressure. Old Dominion, which has been an FBS team playing in Conference USA since 2014, has

gone 8-11 against Sun Belt teams in the past.

SUN BELT WEST

Arkansas State

2021 record: 2-10, 1-7

Top players: TE Emmanuel Stevenson, QB James Blackman, DL Kivon Bennett

Call it growing pains for second-year head coach Butch Jones but since the 2020 season, the Red Wolves have been on a steady decline (6-17 record). They go into 2022 young with 44 freshmen and 25 sophomores. With so many young faces on the roster, the first few games of the season may be rough with inexperience at play. Seniors Blackman and Bennett return valuable experience.

Louisiana-Lafayette

2021 record: 13-1, 8-0

Top players: QB Chandler Fields, WR Peter LeBlanc, CB Eric Garror

A year ago, the question was, can the Ragin' Cajuns pull off a conference win? Now, it has become, 'Can they do it again?' Michael Desormeaux, who threw for 3,893 yards in 43 games as the Ragin' Cajuns quarterback from 2005 to 2008, was the only assistant coach retained when Billy Napier took over in 2018. This is his first head coaching stint. They lost key players to the NFL draft, transfer portal and eligibility but their success over the last few seasons has brought in other potential playmakers, including WRs John Stephens (TCU) and Michael Jefferson (Alabama State).

Louisiana-Monroe

2021 record: 4-8, 2-6

Top players: QB Chandler Rogers, WR Malik Jackson, LB Zack Woodard

The changes brought by Terry Bowden in his first season as head coach moved ULM in the right direction. (Bowden took over after the team had a winless 2020.) The Warhawks took many teams by surprise and mustered four wins. Rogers threw for more than 1,300 yards and had nine TD passes and



Troy linebacker Carlton Martial, who began his career as a walk-on, has 47 tackles for loss in four seasons. BRANDON SUMRALL/AP

three interceptions in 12 games. Woodard is returning after 89 total tackles in 2021. Jackson (451 rushing yards and 10 receptions) embodies a dual-threat play style.

South Alabama

2021 record: 5-7, 2-6

Top players: CB Darrell Luter Jr., TE Lincoln Sefcik, WR Jalen Wayne

During the 2021 season, the Jaguars played seven games decided by 10 points or fewer. Key players from the team, such as wide receiver Jalen Tolbert (drafted by the Dallas Cowboys in the third round) and quarterback Jake Bentley (now a graduate assistant at Florida Atlantic), won't be running the offense. Going into his second year as head coach, Kane Wommack has brought a slow but steady improvement to the Jag-

uars. Wayne (630 yards, two touchdowns) and Luter (four interceptions) were particularly productive players.

Southern Mississippi

2021: 3-9, 2-6 (in Conference USA)

Top players: WR Jason Brownlee, RB Frank Gore Jr., DB Malik Shorts

Southern Miss is one of four new members of the conference but the Golden Eagles are familiar with the Sun Belt. Last fall, they played South Alabama and Troy, losing 31-7 and 21-9, respectively. Head coach Will Hall spent time with Louisiana-Lafayette as the offensive coordinator in 2017. Gore, the son of the former NFL standout, has more than 1,500 yards rushing in two seasons with the Golden Eagles.

Texas State

2021: 4-8, 3-5

Top players: ILB Sione Tupou, RB Calvin Hill, RB Jahmyl Jeter

Going into the 2021 season, the quarterback room was four deep. The two players who saw action aren't returning in 2022, meaning the QB1 slot is up for grabs. Texas State added two quarterbacks in Dillon Markiewicz (Syracuse) and Layne Hatcher (Arkansas State), with Hatcher throwing for more than 7,400 yards and 65 touchdowns in three seasons. Head coach Jake Spavital is calling the offensive plays for the third consecutive season. The team finished 104th in the country in total offense.

Troy

2021 record: 5-7, 3-5

CAN'T-MISS GAMES

Appalachian State at Texas A&M, Sept. 10: The Aggies were the only team to beat No. 1 Alabama during the 2021 regular season. Appalachian State is historically one of the dominant teams from the Sun Belt. The two programs will meet for the first time.

Marshall at James Madison, Oct. 22: Two Sun Belt newcomers face off for the first time since 1994. The Thundering Herd lead the series 2-0 but the Dukes may have the momentum after dominating Football Championship Subdivision competition in recent years.

Appalachian State at Coastal Carolina, Nov. 3: In a battle in the East Division, the Mountaineers and Chanticleers go head-to-head for the eighth time in program histories. Appalachian State leads the series 7-1 with a 30-27 win in 2021. This game could decide who will be representing the division in the championship game.

Louisiana-Lafayette at Florida State, Nov. 19: The reigning Sun Belt champions take on the Atlantic Coast Conference foe in Tallahassee. This is the first time the two programs will meet. FSU is looking for its first winning season since 2017.

Top players: WR Tez Johnson, LB Carlton Martial, RB Jamonte Woods

Last season, Chip Lindsey's job was on the line and not securing a bowl game might be the reason Joe Sumrall was hired as the head coach in early December. Another new head coach in the Sun Belt is due some growing pains as he begins his first head coaching stint. Sumrall was with the Trojans from 2015 to 2017 as an assistant head coach and they saw bowl wins, conference championship and a upset over LSU of the Southeastern Conference.

— Emely Hernandez,
The (Monroe, La.) News Star

INDEPENDENTS

Army

2021 record: 9-4

Projected record: 9-3

Top players: LB Andre Carter II, RB Tyrell Robinson, WR Isaiah Alston

Carter returns as one of the premier pass rushers in the country. The 6-7 junior led the nation in sacks per game (1.19), a figure slightly higher than what Alabama's Will Anderson and the 2022 NFL No. 2 overall draft pick Aidan Hutchinson of Michigan had. He also recorded 15.5 sacks, four forced fumbles, 18.5 tackles for loss, five QB hurries and an interception. After entering the transfer portal, Robinson, a junior running back, and Alston, a sophomore, decided to return. Robinson had 949 yards from scrimmage and six touchdowns. Alston led the team in receiving with 22 receptions, 449 yards and three touchdowns. The Black Knights quarterback battle of Tyhier Tyler, Cade Ballard and Jemel Jones will be instrumental in the success of a team looking to win its second consecutive bowl game.

BYU

2021 record: 10-3

Projected record: 9-3

Top players: QB Jaren Hall, WR Puka Nacua, OT Blake Freeland

Hall is a dual threat (2,583 yards passing, 307 rushing, 23 total touchdowns). Nacua (805 yards) will be one of Hall's primary weapons on the outside with his fluid hips and outstanding start-stop quickness. Freeland is an NFL prospect based on his 6-8 frame and nifty quickness. He will be tasked with keeping Hall upright to deliver strikes downfield and building on an offense that averaged 33.1 points per game last season. BYU will look to improve a defense that gave up 388.8 yards per game. With the healthy linebacker duo of Keenan Pili and Payton Wilgar coming back, the defense should be significantly better.

Connecticut

2021 record: 1-11

Projected record: 1-11

Top players: LB Jackson Mitchell, LB Ian Swenson, WR Keelan Marion

Newly hired coach Jim Mora will look to put his imprint on a program that is looking to make a significant increase in the wins column. Mitchell returns as a three-down linebacker with the ability to make consistent tackles in space and to play a major role in defending the run. He led the team with 120 tackles and added 6.5 tackles for loss and 1.5 sacks. Swenson has proved to be just as disruptive, registering 73 total tackles, four tackles for loss, four quarterback hurries and one sack. Marion is extremely difficult to bring down in open space. Mora's club will be looking for Penn State transfer Ta'Quan Roberson to play quarterback.

Liberty

2021 record: 8-5

Projected record: 7-5

Top players: WR Demario Douglas, S Javon Scruggs, QB Charlie Brewer

The Flames will enter the season with Brewer, a Utah transfer, as their new quarterback, after former quarterback Malik Willis was drafted in the third round of the 2022 NFL draft by the Tennessee Titans. Brewer appeared in three games last season and threw for 484 yards, three touchdowns and three interceptions. Douglas was Liberty's leading receiver in receptions (52) and yards (701), while he had six touchdowns. Scruggs is the ultimate playmaker in the secondary, with 195 tackles, 9.5 tackles for loss, five interceptions, five forced fumbles and 11 broken-up passes in 39 games.

Massachusetts

2021 record: 1-11

Projected record: 3-9

Top players: RB Ellis Merriweather, LB Gerrell Johnson, LB



Army's Andre Carter enjoyed an outstanding sophomore season in 2021 that saw him compile 18.5 tackles per loss and 15.5 sacks. DANNY WILD/USA TODAY SPORTS

Da'Shon Ross

Merriweather was the heart and soul of the Minutemen offense, tallying 218 carries, 1,138 yards and five touchdowns. The bell-cow running back averaged 5.2 yards per carry, but that wasn't enough to generate enough points on the scoreboard for UMass.

Last season, Johnson was a force on the second level for the UMass defense with 80 tackles, 1.5 sacks and three forced fumbles. UMass is hopeful that quarterback Brady Olson will lead the offense to more plays that generate tons of points scored. Head coach Don Brown will look to increase UMass' mediocre points per game average of 16.3.

New Mexico State

2021 record: 2-10

Projected record: 2-10

Top players: S Jerrick Reed II, DB Caleb Mills, WR Jared Wyatt

Wins were at a premium last season for the Aggies and they even struggled to record a road victory during the 2021 campaign.

Reed has started every year of his career and has a knack for being around the football. The rangy safety has recorded 172 tackles, 10 broken-up passes, six interceptions and one pick-six in his three seasons for the Aggies.

Mills is an aggressive defensive back who can play in man or zone, with a mindset of coming up in open space to make tackles.

Notre Dame

2021 record: 11-2

Projected record: 9-3

Top players: TE Michael Mayer, S Brandon Joseph, LB JD Bertrand

Mayer is a red-zone nightmare for opposing defenses and can solidify himself as a top-15 selection in the 2023 NFL draft with another good season. First-year head coach Marcus Freeman will replace Brian Kelly, who accepted the head coaching job at LSU. Freeman will rely on Joseph and Bertrand to lead a defense that was in the top 15 in turnovers forced with 25 takeaways.

Notre Dame will be without play-making safety Kyle Hamilton, the No. 14 overall pick by the Baltimore Ravens. The Irish will look to play complementary football and will be tested out of the gate with a Sept. 3 road showdown with star quarterback C.J. Stroud and Ohio State.

TELEVISION SCHEDULE (ET)

Subject to change. More games added once season begins.

Saturday, Aug. 27
Austin Peay at Western Kentucky, CBSSN, noon
Idaho State at UNLV, CBSSN, 3:30 p.m.
Jacksonville State vs. Stephen F. Austin, ESPN, 3:30 p.m.
Duquesne at Florida State, ACCN, 5 p.m.
Howard at Alabama State, ESPN, 7 p.m.
Florida A&M at North Carolina, ACCN, 8:15 p.m

Thursday, Sept. 1
VMI at Wake Forest, ACCN, 7:30 p.m.
Alabama A&M at UAB, CBSSN, 8 p.m.
Northern Arizona at Arizona State, PAC-12, 10 p.m.
Cal Poly at Fresno State, FS1, 10:30 p.m.

Friday, Sept. 2
Tennessee Tech at Kansas, BIG12/ESPN+, 8 p.m.

Saturday, Sept. 3
South Dakota State at Iowa, FS1, noon
Southeast Missouri State at Iowa State, BIG12/ESPN+, 2 p.m.
Bethune-Cookman at Miami, ACCN, 3:30 p.m.
North Dakota at Nebraska, BTN, 3:30 p.m.
Albany at Baylor BIG12/ESPN+, 7 p.m.
Illinois State at Wisconsin, FS1, 7 p.m.
South Dakota at Kansas State, BIG12/ESPN+, 7 p.m.
Murray State at Texas Tech, BIG12/ESPN+, 8 p.m.
Idaho at Washington State, PAC-12, 9:30 p.m.

Sunday, Sept. 4
Florida A&M at Jackson State, ESPN2, 3 p.m.
Florida State vs. LSU (New Orleans), ABC, 7:30 p.m.

Monday, Sept. 5
Clemson at Georgia Tech, ESPN, 8 p.m.

Saturday, Sept. 10
Western Illinois at Minnesota, BTN, noon
Furman at Clemson, ACCN, 3:30 p.m.
Indiana State at Purdue, BTN, 4 p.m.
Samford at Georgia, SECN, 4 p.m.
Wagner at Rutgers, BTN, 4 p.m.
Alabama State at UCLA, PAC-12, 5 p.m.
Southern at LSU, SECN, 7:30 p.m.
Idaho at Indiana, BTN, 8 p.m.
Eastern Washington at Oregon, PAC-12, 8:30 p.m.

Friday, Sept. 16
Wofford at Virginia Tech, ACCN, 11 a.m.
Southern Illinois at Northwestern, BTN, noon
Youngstown State at Kentucky, SECN, noon
Townson at West Virginia, BIG12/ESPN+, 1 p.m.
UT Martin at Boise State, FS1, 4 p.m.
Arkansas-Pine Bluff at Oklahoma State, BIG12/ESPN+, 7 p.m.
Montana State at Oregon State, PAC-12, 8 p.m.
North Dakota State at Arizona, FS1, 11 p.m.

Thursday, Sept. 22
Coastal Carolina at Georgia State, ESPNU, 7:30 p.m.
West Virginia at Virginia Tech, ESPN, 7:30 p.m.
Chattanooga at Illinois, BTN, 8:30 p.m.

Friday, Sept. 23
Nevada at Air Force, FS1, 8 p.m.
Boise State at UTEP, CBSSN, 9 p.m.

Saturday, Sept. 24
Kent State at Georgia, SECN/ESPN+, noon
Florida International at Western Kentucky, CBSSN, 3:30 p.m.
UNLV at Utah State, CBSSN, 7 p.m.
Florida Atlantic at Purdue, BTN, 7:30 p.m.
New Mexico at LSU, SECN/ESPN+, 7:30 p.m.
Western Michigan at San José State, CBSSN, 9:30 p.m.
Central Michigan at Penn State, BTN, TBD
Miami (Ohio) at Northwestern, BTN, TBD
Wisconsin at Ohio State, ABC, TBD

Thursday, Sept. 29
Utah State at BYU, ESPN, 8 p.m.

Friday, Sept. 30
Tulane at Washington, ESPN, 7 p.m.
San Diego State at Boise State, FS1, 8 p.m.

Saturday, Oct. 1
Eastern Washington at Florida, SECN/ESPN+, noon
Navy at Air Force, CBS, noon
Fresno State at UConn, CBSSN, 3:30 p.m.
San José State at Wyoming, CBSSN, 7:30 p.m.
UTSA at Middle Tennessee, CBSSN, 7:30 p.m.
New Mexico at UNLV, CBSSN, 11:00 p.m.

Friday, Oct. 7
Nebraska at Rutgers, FS1, 7 p.m.
Houston at Memphis, ESPN2, 7:30 p.m.
Colorado State at Nevada, FS1, 10:30 p.m.

Saturday, Oct. 8
Wyoming at New Mexico, CBSSN, 7 p.m.
BYU vs. Notre Dame (Las Vegas), NBC, 7:30 p.m.
Hawai'i at San Diego State, CBSSN, 7:30 p.m.

UNLV at San José State, CBSSN, 10:30 p.m.
Texas vs. Oklahoma (Dallas), ABC, TBD

Wednesday, Oct. 12
Louisiana-Lafayette at Marshall, ESPN2, 7:30 p.m.

Thursday, Oct. 13
Temple at UCF, ESPN, 7 p.m.

Friday, Oct. 14
Navy at SMU, ESPN, 7:30 p.m.

Saturday, Oct. 15
Utah State at Colorado State, CBSSN, 7 p.m.
UTSA at Florida International, CBSSN, 8 p.m.
Air Force at UNLV, CBSSN, 10:30 p.m.

Wednesday, Oct. 19
Georgia State at Appalachian State, ESPN2, 7:30 p.m.

Thursday, Oct. 20
Troy at South Alabama, ESPNU, 7:30 p.m.

Friday, Oct. 21
Tulsa at Temple, ESPN2, 7:30 p.m.

Saturday, Oct. 22
UNLV at Notre Dame, NBC, 2:30 p.m.
Boise State at Air Force, CBSSN, 7 p.m.
UAB at Western Kentucky, CBSSN, 8 p.m.
San Diego State at Nevada, CBSSN, 10:30 p.m.

Thursday, Oct. 27
Louisiana-Lafayette at Southern Mississippi, ESPNU, 7:30 p.m.

Friday, Oct. 28
East Carolina at BYU, ESPN2, 8 p.m.

Saturday, Oct. 29
UAB at Florida Atlantic, CBSSN, 7 p.m.
Louisiana Tech at Florida International, CBSSN, 8 p.m.
Nevada at San José State, CBSSN, 10:30 p.m.

Thursday, Nov. 3
Appalachian State at Coastal Carolina, ESPN, 7:30 p.m.

Friday, Nov. 4
Massachusetts at Connecticut, CBSSN, 7 p.m.

Saturday, Nov. 5
Air Force vs. Army (Arlington, Texas), CBS, 11:30 a.m.
Western Kentucky at Charlotte, CBSSN, noon
New Mexico at Utah State, CBSSN, 3:30 p.m.
UNLV at San Diego State, CBSSN, 7 p.m.
UTEP at Rice, CBSSN, 7 p.m.

Thursday, Nov. 10
Georgia Southern at Louisiana-Lafayette, ESPNU, 7:30 p.m.
Tulsa at Memphis, ESPN, 7:30 p.m.

Friday, Nov. 11
East Carolina at Cincinnati, ESPN2, 7:30 p.m.

Saturday, Nov. 12
Liberty at Connecticut, CBSSN, noon
New Mexico at Air Force, CBSSN, 3:30 p.m.
Wyoming at Colorado State, CBSSN, 7 p.m.
Boise State at Nevada, CBSSN, 10:30 p.m.
Fresno State at UNLV, CBSSN, 10:30 p.m.

Thursday, Nov. 17
SMU at Tulane, ESPN, TBD

Friday, Nov. 18
San Diego State at New Mexico, FS1, TBD
South Florida at Tulsa, ESPN2, 9 p.m.

Saturday, Nov. 19
Austin Peay at Alabama, SECN/ESPN+, noon
Akron at Buffalo, CBSSN, 3:30 p.m.
Boise State at Wyoming, CBSSN, 7 p.m.
Fresno State at Nevada, CBSSN, 10:30 p.m.
East Tennessee State at Mississippi State, SECN/ESPN+, TBD
Massachusetts at Texas A&M, SECN/ESPN+, TBD

Friday, Nov. 25
Utah State at Boise State, CBS, noon
Wyoming at Fresno State, FS1, 10 p.m.

Saturday, Nov. 26
Western Kentucky at Florida Atlantic, CBSSN, noon
Southern vs. Grambling State (New Orleans), NBC, 2 p.m.
New Mexico at Colorado State, CBSSN, 3:30 p.m.
UAB at Louisiana Tech, CBSSN, 3:30 p.m.
Air Force at San Diego State, CBSSN, 9 p.m.

Friday, Dec. 2
CUSA championship, CBSSN, 8 p.m.
Pac-12 championship (Las Vegas), Fox, 8 p.m.

Saturday, Dec. 3
MAC championship (Detroit), ESPN, noon
Sun Belt championship, ESPN, 3:30 p.m.
American Athletic championship, ABC, 4 p.m.
Mountin West championship, Fox, 4 p.m.
SEC championship (Atlanta), CBS, 4 p.m.
Big Ten championship (Indianapolis), Fox, 8 p.m.
ACC championship (Charlotte, N.C.), ABC, TBD
Big 12 Championship (Arlington, Texas), ABC, TBD

Saturday, Dec. 10
Army vs. Navy (Philadelphia), CBS, 3 p.m.

JEFF SAGARIN PRESEASON RATINGS

These ratings for Division I college football teams were devised by Jeff Sagarin, a 1970 Massachusetts Institute of Technology mathematics graduate. The rating is a numerical measure of the team's strength. A hypothetical victory margin is determined by comparing the rating of the two teams after adding 1.87 points to the home team. This home edge will vary during the season. Only Division I games are counted for rating and schedule strength during the season. Diminishing returns principle exists to prevent teams from building up ratings by running up large victory margins against weak teams. Instead, it rewards teams that do well against good opponents. FBS and FCS teams are combined.					
1 Alabama.....	101.10	73 Tulsa.....	69.28	168 Tennessee-Martin.....	46.33
2 Georgia.....	98.45	74 Alabama-Birmingham.....	69.19	169 Delaware.....	46.23
3 Ohio State.....	95.73	75 James Madison.....	69.17	170 Northern Arizona.....	46.11
4 Clemson.....	92.67	76 Colorado.....	69.10	171 Holy Cross.....	45.56
5 Oklahoma.....	91.73	77 Central Michigan.....	69.01	172 Wofford.....	45.40
6 Notre Dame.....	87.81	78 Nevada.....	68.96	173 Akron.....	45.12
7 Oklahoma State.....	86.63	79 Buffalo.....	68.53	174 N.C. A&T.....	44.91
8 Iowa State.....	86.61	80 Northwestern.....	68.29	175 Florida International.....	44.85
9 Utah.....	85.48	81 Marshall.....	68.24	176 William & Mary.....	44.68
10 Texas A&M.....	84.67	82 Coastal Carolina.....	67.89	177 Portland State.....	44.43
11 Oregon.....	83.89	83 Wyoming.....	67.64	178 Indiana State.....	44.06
12 Auburn.....	83.26	84 Miami (Ohio).....	67.23	179 Connecticut.....	43.85
13 Wisconsin.....	83.22	85 Utah State.....	67.22	180 New Mexico State.....	43.45
14 Texas.....	83.11	86 Western Kentucky.....	67.17	181 Southeast Missouri State.....	43.19
15 Baylor.....	83.01	87 Liberty.....	67.10	182 Charleston Southern.....	42.84
16 LSU.....	82.72	88 Northern Illinois.....	66.64	183 Elon.....	41.66
17 Michigan.....	82.65	89 Navy.....	66.46	184 Idaho State.....	41.64
18 Florida.....	82.60	90 Maryland.....	66.12	185 Southern Utah.....	41.44
19 Penn State.....	82.31	91 Montana.....	66.09	186 Abilene Christian.....	40.53
20 Cincinnati.....	81.36	92 Tulane.....	65.94	187 Stony Brook.....	40.23
21 Arizona State.....	81.32	93 Ball State.....	65.18	188 VMI.....	40.01
22 Iowa.....	80.66	94 Northern Iowa.....	64.96	189 Pennsylvania.....	39.45
23 Washington.....	79.89	95 Texas-San Antonio.....	64.85	190 North Alabama.....	39.34
24 Mississippi.....	79.84	96 Eastern Michigan.....	64.40	191 Rhode Island.....	39.19
25 Boise State.....	79.54	97 Arizona.....	64.40	192 The Citadel.....	39.00
26 UCLA.....	78.82	98 Ohio.....	64.11	193 Murray State.....	38.63
27 Wake Forest.....	78.78	99 Georgia Tech.....	63.88	194 Florida A&M.....	38.29
28 Kansas State.....	78.63	100 Illinois.....	63.68	195 Alcorn State.....	38.03
29 Miami (Fla.).....	78.26	101 Hawaii.....	63.29	196 Maine.....	37.98
30 Southern California.....	78.09	102 San Jose State.....	63.27	197 Northwestern State.....	37.86
31 Pittsburgh.....	78.06	103 Sam Houston State.....	62.82	198 Southern.....	37.75
32 BYU.....	78.03	104 Kent State.....	62.67	199 Northern Colorado.....	37.28
33 Mississippi State.....	77.86	105 Eastern Washington.....	62.23	200 Western Carolina.....	37.27
34 N.C. State.....	77.54	106 Colorado State.....	61.54	201 Campbell.....	37.11
35 Kentucky.....	77.34	107 Georgia State.....	61.39	202 Columbia.....	36.91
36 Minnesota.....	76.84	108 East Carolina.....	61.39	203 Alabama A&M.....	36.47
37 Washington State.....	76.04	109 Florida Atlantic.....	61.38	204 Albany.....	35.91
38 North Carolina.....	75.92	110 Troy.....	61.01	205 Texas State.....	35.80
39 TCU.....	75.86	111 Rutgers.....	61.01	206 Massachusetts.....	35.17
40 Appalachian State.....	75.81	112 Louisiana Tech.....	60.27	207 Jackson State.....	35.09
41 West Virginia.....	75.79	113 Georgia Southern.....	60.15	208 Utah Tech.....	35.05
42 Tennessee.....	75.63	114 Middle Tennessee.....	60.09	209 Cornell.....	35.05
43 Texas Tech.....	75.61	115 Duke.....	59.81	210 Fordham.....	34.82
44 Central Florida.....	75.37	116 Montana State.....	59.28	211 New Hampshire.....	34.53
45 Air Force.....	75.25	117 Weber State.....	58.75	212 SC State.....	34.38
46 Arkansas.....	75.03	118 Southern Illinois.....	58.34	213 Gardner-Webb.....	33.55
47 North Dakota State.....	75.02	119 Arkansas State.....	57.96	214 Saint Francis (Pa.).....	33.52
48 Michigan State.....	74.70	120 South Florida.....	57.93	215 Central Connecticut.....	33.44
49 Oregon State.....	74.58	121 North Dakota.....	57.89	216 Prairie View.....	33.04
50 Louisville.....	74.56	122 Louisiana-Monroe.....	57.11	217 Sacred Heart.....	32.91
51 California.....	73.90	123 Dartmouth.....	57.02	218 Duquesne.....	32.35
52 Purdue.....	73.86	124 South Dakota.....	56.49	219 St. Thomas (Minn.).....	32.17
53 Virginia.....	73.71	125 Vanderbilt.....	56.45	220 Brown.....	31.78
54 Nebraska.....	73.48	126 UNLV.....	56.31	221 Tennessee State.....	31.73
55 Stanford.....	72.85	127 Princeton.....	56.18	222 Eastern Illinois.....	31.65
56 Missouri.....	72.71	128 North Texas.....	55.94	223 Cal Poly.....	31.56
57 Toledo.....	72.47	129 Sacramento State.....	55.65	224 Lamar.....	30.92
58 San Diego State.....	72.41	130 Southeastern Louisiana.....	55.64	225 Norfolk State.....	30.87
59 Houston.....	72.38	131 Kansas.....	55.37	226 San Diego.....	30.27
60 Virginia Tech.....	72.19	132 South Alabama.....	55.09	227 Tennessee Tech.....	29.71
61 Western Michigan.....	72.15	133 Old Dominion.....	55.05	228 Houston Baptist.....	29.68
62 SMU.....	71.50	134 Missouri State.....	54.74	229 Bethune-Cookman.....	29.53
63 Florida State.....	71.22	135 UC Davis.....	54.66	230 Grambling State.....	29.07
64 Boston College.....	70.64	136 Kennesaw State.....	53.95	231 Alabama State.....	28.75
65 South Carolina.....	70.64	137 Southern Miss.....	53.79	232 NC Central.....	28.56
66 Memphis.....	70.36	138 New Mexico.....	53.74	233 Robert Morris.....	28.52
67 Fresno State.....	70.17	139 Nicholls State.....	53.10	234 Dayton.....	27.89
68 South Dakota State.....	70.14	140 Rice.....	52.76	235 Bryant.....	27.27
69 Louisiana-Lafayette.....	70.07	141 Harvard.....	52.58	236 Hampton.....	27.06
70 Indiana.....	69.76	142 Youngstown State.....	52.42	237 Colgate.....	26.57
71 Army.....	69.66	143 Illinois State.....	51.86	238 Georgetown.....	25.56
72 Syracuse.....	69.29	144 Monmouth.....	51.78	239 Lehigh.....	25.08
		145 Chattanooga.....	51.63	240 Ark.-Pine Bluff.....	24.99
		146 Central Arkansas.....	51.60	241 Lafayette.....	24.54
		147 Villanova.....	51.50	242 Davidson.....	22.96
		148 Charlotte.....	51.42	243 Drake.....	22.77
		149 Temple.....	51.27	244 Texas Southern.....	22.61
		150 Texas-El Paso.....	50.18	245 Lindenwood.....	21.35
		151 Furman.....	50.17	246 Stonehill.....	21.35
		152 Incarnate Word.....	49.90	247 Texas A&M-Commerce.....	21.35
		153 McNeese State.....	49.57	248 Delaware State.....	21.09
		154 Samford.....	49.50	249 Marist.....	20.08
		155 Towson.....	49.22	250 Merrimack.....	20.08
		156 Jacksonville State.....	48.81	251 Howard.....	19.83
		157 Yale.....	48.71	252 Morgan State.....	19.49
		158 Mercer.....	48.39	253 Miss. Valley State.....	18.25
		159 Richmond.....	48.25	254 Bucknell.....	18.08
		160 Bowling Green.....	47.62	255 Valparaiso.....	17.77
		161 Stephen F. Austin.....	47.56	256 Morehead State.....	17.67
		162 Eastern Kentucky.....	47.53	257 Wagner.....	13.69
		163 Idaho.....	47.09	258 Long Island.....	13.61
		164 Tarleton State.....	47.01	259 Butler.....	8.66
		165 Austin Peay.....	46.84	260 Presbyterian.....	8.54
		166 East Tennessee State.....	46.82	261 Stetson.....	6.34
		167 Western Illinois.....	46.35		

FBS SCHEDULES

Air Force

2021 record: 10-3

S. 3 vs. Northern Iowa
S. 10 vs. Colorado
S. 16 at Wyoming
S. 23 vs. Nevada
O. 1 vs. Navy
O. 8 at Utah State
O. 15 at UNLV
O. 22 vs. Boise State
N. 5. Army*
N. 12 vs. New Mexico
N. 19 vs. Colorado State
N. 26 at San Diego State
*Arlington, Texas

Akron

2021 record: 2-10

S. 1 vs. Saint Francis (Pa.)
S. 10 at Michigan State
S. 17 at Tennessee
S. 24 at Liberty
O. 1 vs. Bowling Green
O. 8 at Ohio
O. 15 vs. Central Michigan
O. 22 at Kent State
O. 29 vs. Miami (Ohio)
N. 8 vs. Eastern Michigan
N. 19 at Buffalo
N. 26 at Northern Illinois

Alabama

2021 record: 13-2

S. 3 vs. Utah State
S. 10 at Texas
S. 17 vs. Louisiana-Monroe
S. 24 vs. Vanderbilt
O. 1 at Arkansas
O. 8 vs. Texas A&M
O. 15 at Tennessee
O. 22 vs. Mississippi State
N. 5 at LSU
N. 12 at Mississippi
N. 19 vs. Austin Peay
N. 26 vs. Auburn

Alabama-Birmingham

2021 record: 9-4

S. 1 vs. Alabama A&M
S. 10 at Liberty
S. 17 vs. Georgia Southern
O. 1 at Rice
O. 8 vs. Middle Tennessee State
O. 15 vs. Charlotte
O. 21 at Western Kentucky
O. 29 at Florida Atlantic
N. 5 vs. Texas-San Antonio
N. 12 vs. North Texas
N. 19 at LSU
N. 26 at Louisiana Tech

Appalachian State

2021 record: 10-4

S. 3 vs. North Carolina
S. 10 at Texas A&M
S. 17 vs. Troy
S. 24 vs. James Madison
O. 1 vs. The Citadel
O. 8 at Texas State
O. 19 vs. Georgia State
O. 29 vs. Robert Morris
N. 3 at Coastal Carolina
N. 12 at Marshall
N. 19 vs. Old Dominion
N. 26 at Georgia Southern

Arizona

2021 record: 1-11

S. 3 at San Diego State
S. 10 vs. Mississippi State
S. 17 vs. North Dakota State
S. 24 at California
O. 1 vs. Colorado
O. 8 vs. Oregon
O. 15 at Washington
O. 29 vs. Southern California
N. 5 at Utah
N. 12 at UCLA
N. 19 vs. Washington State
N. 25 vs. Arizona State

Arizona State

2021 record: 8-5

S. 1 vs. Northern Arizona
S. 10 at Oklahoma State
S. 17 vs. Eastern Michigan
S. 24 vs. Utah
O. 1 at Southern California
O. 8 vs. Washington
O. 22 at Stanford
O. 29 at Colorado
N. 5 vs. UCLA
N. 12 at Washington State
N. 19 vs. Oregon State
N. 25 at Arizona

Arkansas

2021 record: 9-4

S. 3 vs. Cincinnati
S. 10 vs. South Carolina
S. 17 vs. Missouri State
S. 24 vs. Texas A&M*
O. 1 vs. Alabama
O. 8 at Mississippi State
O. 15 at BYU
O. 29 at Auburn
N. 5 vs. Liberty
N. 12 vs. LSU
N. 19 vs. Mississippi
N. 25 at Missouri

*Arlington, Texas

Arkansas State

2021 record: 2-10

S. 3 vs. Grambling State
S. 10 at Ohio State
S. 17 at Memphis
S. 24 at Old Dominion
O. 1 vs. Louisiana-Monroe
O. 8 vs. James Madison
O. 15 at Southern Mississippi
O. 22 at Louisiana-Lafayette
O. 29 vs. South Alabama
N. 12 vs. Massachusetts
N. 19 at Texas State
N. 26 vs. Troy

Army

2021 record: 9-4

S. 3 at Coastal Carolina
S. 10 vs. Texas-San Antonio
S. 17 vs. Villanova
O. 1 vs. Georgia State
O. 8 at Wake Forest
O. 15 vs. Colgate
O. 22 vs. Louisiana-Monroe
N. 5 vs. Air Force*
N. 12 at Troy
N. 19 vs. Connecticut
N. 26 at Massachusetts
D. 10 vs. Navy**

*Arlington, Texas

**Philadelphia

Auburn

2021 record: 6-7

S. 3 vs. Mercer
S. 10 vs. San Jose State
S. 17 vs. Penn State
S. 24 vs. Missouri
O. 1 vs. LSU
O. 8 at Georgia
O. 15 at Mississippi
O. 29 vs. Arkansas
N. 5 at Mississippi State
N. 12 vs. Texas A&M
N. 19 vs. Western Kentucky
N. 26 at Alabama

Ball State

2021 record: 6-7

S. 1 at Tennessee
S. 10 vs. Western Michigan
S. 17 vs. Murray State
S. 24 at Georgia Southern
O. 1 vs. Northern Illinois
O. 8 at Central Michigan
O. 15 vs. Connecticut
O. 22 vs. Eastern Michigan
N. 1 at Kent State
N. 8 at Toledo

N. 15 vs. Ohio

N. 22 at Miami (Ohio)

Baylor

2021 record: 12-2

S. 3 vs. Albany
S. 10 at BYU
S. 17 vs. Texas State
S. 24 at Iowa State
O. 1 vs. Oklahoma State
O. 13 at West Virginia
O. 22 vs. Kansas
O. 29 at Texas Tech
N. 5 at Oklahoma
N. 12 vs. Kansas State
N. 19 vs. TCU
N. 25 at Texas

Boise State

2021 record: 7-5

S. 3 at Oregon State
S. 9 at New Mexico
S. 17 vs. UT-Martin
S. 23 at Texas-El Paso
S. 30 vs. San Diego State
O. 8 vs. Fresno State
O. 22 at Air Force
O. 29 vs. Colorado State
N. 5 vs. BYU
N. 12 at Nevada
N. 19 at Wyoming
N. 25 vs. Utah State

Boston College

2021 record: 6-6

S. 3 vs. Rutgers
S. 10 at Virginia Tech
S. 17 vs. Maine
S. 24 at Florida State
O. 1 vs. Louisville
O. 8 vs. Clemson
O. 22 at Wake Forest
O. 29 at Connecticut
N. 4 vs. Duke
N. 12 at N.C. State
N. 19 at Notre Dame
N. 26 vs. Syracuse

Bowling Green

2021 record: 4-8

S. 3 at UCLA
S. 10 vs. Eastern Kentucky
S. 17 vs. Marshall
S. 24 at Mississippi State
O. 1 at Akron
O. 8 vs. Buffalo
O. 15 vs. Miami (Ohio)
O. 22 at Central Michigan
N. 2 vs. Western Michigan
N. 9 vs. Kent State
N. 15 at Toledo
N. 22 at Ohio

BYU

2021 record: 10-3

S. 3 at South Florida
S. 10 vs. Baylor
S. 17 at Oregon
S. 24 vs. Wyoming
S. 29 vs. Utah State
O. 8 vs. Notre Dame*
O. 15 vs. Arkansas
O. 22 at Liberty
O. 28 vs. East Carolina
N. 5 at Boise State
N. 19 vs. Utah Tech
N. 26 at Stanford
*Las Vegas

Buffalo

2021 record: 4-8

S. 3 at Maryland
S. 10 vs. Holy Cross
S. 17 at Coastal Carolina
S. 24 at Eastern Michigan
O. 1 vs. Miami (Ohio)
O. 8 at Bowling Green
O. 15 at Massachusetts
O. 22 vs. Toledo
N. 1 at Ohio

N. 9 at Central Michigan

N. 19 vs. Akron

N. 26 vs. Kent State

California

2021 record: 5-7

S. 3 vs. UC-Davis
S. 10 vs. UNLV
S. 17 at Notre Dame
S. 24 vs. Arizona
O. 1 at Washington State
O. 15 at Colorado
O. 22 vs. Washington
O. 29 vs. Oregon
N. 5 at Southern California
N. 12 at Oregon State
N. 19 vs. Stanford
N. 25 vs. UCLA

Central Florida

2021 record: 9-4

S. 1 vs. South Carolina State
S. 9 vs. Louisville
S. 17 at Florida Atlantic
S. 24 vs. Georgia Tech
O. 1 vs. SMU
O. 13 vs. Temple
O. 22 at East Carolina
O. 29 vs. Cincinnati
N. 5 at Memphis
N. 12 at Tulane
N. 19 vs. Navy
N. 25 at South Florida

Central Michigan

2021 record: 9-4

S. 1 at Oklahoma State
S. 10 vs. South Alabama
S. 17 vs. Bucknell
S. 24 at Penn State
O. 1 at Toledo
O. 8 vs. Ball State
O. 15 at Akron
O. 22 vs. Bowling Green
N. 2 at Northern Illinois
N. 9 vs. Buffalo
O. 22 at Wake Forest
N. 16 vs. Western Michigan
N. 25 at Eastern Michigan

Charlotte

2021 record: 5-7

A. 27 at Florida Atlantic
S. 2 vs. William & Mary
S. 10 vs. Maryland
S. 17 at Georgia State
S. 24 at South Carolina
O. 1 vs. Texas-El Paso
O. 15 at Alabama-Birmingham
O. 22 vs. Florida International
O. 29 at Rice
N. 5 vs. Western Kentucky
N. 12 at Middle Tennessee State
N. 19 vs. Louisiana Tech

Cincinnati

2021 record: 13-1

S. 3 at Arkansas
S. 10 at Kennesaw State
S. 17 at Miami (Ohio)
S. 24 vs. Indiana
O. 1 at Tulsa
O. 8 vs. South Florida
O. 22 at SMU
O. 29 at Central Florida
N. 5 vs. Navy
N. 11 vs. East Carolina
N. 19 at Temple
N. 26 vs. Tulane

Clemson

2021 record: 10-3

S. 5 at Georgia Tech*
S. 10 vs. Furman
S. 17 vs. Louisiana Tech
S. 24 at Wake Forest
O. 1 vs. N.C. State
O. 8 at Boston College
O. 15 at Florida State
O. 22 vs. Syracuse
N. 5 at Notre Dame
N. 12 vs. Louisville
N. 19 vs. Miami (Fla.)
N. 26 vs. South Carolina

*Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta

Coastal Carolina

2021 record: 11-2

S. 3 vs. Army
S. 10 vs. Gardner-Webb
S. 17 vs. Buffalo
S. 22 at Georgia State
O. 1 vs. Georgia Southern
O. 8 at Louisiana-Monroe
O. 15 vs. Old Dominion
O. 29 at Marshall
N. 3 vs. Appalachian State
N. 12 vs. Southern Mississippi
N. 19 at Virginia
N. 26 at James Madison

Colorado

2021 record: 4-8

S. 2 vs. TCU
S. 10 at Air Force
S. 17 at Minnesota
S. 24 vs. UCLA
O. 1 at Arizona
O. 15 vs. California
O. 22 at Oregon State
O. 29 vs. Arizona State
N. 5 vs. Oregon
N. 11 at Southern California
N. 19 at Washington
N. 26 vs. Utah

Colorado State

2021 record: 3-9

S. 3 at Michigan
S. 10 vs. Middle Tennessee State
S. 17 at Washington State
S. 24 vs. Sacramento State
O. 7 at Nevada
O. 15 vs. Utah State
O. 22 vs. Hawaii
O. 29 at Boise State
N. 5 at San Jose State
N. 12 vs. Wyoming
N. 19 at Air Force
N. 25 vs. New Mexico

Connecticut

2021 record: 1-11

A. 27 at Utah State
S. 3 vs. Central Connecticut State
S. 10 vs. Syracuse
S. 17 at Michigan
S. 24 at N.C. State
O. 1 vs. Fresno State
O. 8 at Florida International
O. 15 at Ball State
O. 29 vs. Boston College
N. 4 vs. Massachusetts
N. 12 vs. Liberty
N. 19 at Army

Duke

2021 record: 3-9

S. 2 vs. Temple
S. 10 at Northwestern
S. 17 vs. North Carolina A&T
S. 24 at Kansas
O. 1 vs. Virginia
O. 8 at Georgia Tech
O. 15 vs. North Carolina
O. 22 at Miami (Fla.)
N. 4 at Boston College
N. 12 vs. Virginia Tech
N. 19 at Pittsburgh
N. 26 vs. Wake Forest

East Carolina

2021 record: 7-5

S. 3 vs. N.C. State
S. 10 vs. Old Dominion
S. 17 vs. Campbell
S. 24 vs. Navy
O. 1 at South Florida
O. 8 at Tulane
O. 15 vs. Memphis
O. 22 vs. Central Florida
O. 28 at BYU
N. 11 at Cincinnati
N. 19 vs. Houston
N. 26 at Temple

Eastern Michigan

2021 record: 7-6

S. 2 vs. Eastern Kentucky
S. 10 at Louisiana-Lafayette
S. 17 at Arizona State

S. 24 vs. Buffalo
O. 1 vs. Massachussets
O. 8 at Western Michigan
O. 15 vs. Northern Illinois
O. 22 at Ball State
O. 29 vs. Toledo
N. 8 at Akron
N. 16 at Kent State
N. 25 vs. Central Michigan

Florida

2021 record: 6-7

S. 3 vs. Utah
S. 10 vs. Kentucky
S. 17 vs. South Florida
S. 24 at Tennessee
O. 1 vs. Eastern Washington
O. 8 vs. Missouri
O. 15 vs. LSU
O. 29 vs. Georgia*
N. 5 at Texas A&M
N. 12 vs. South Carolina
N. 19 at Vanderbilt
N. 25 at Florida State
*Jacksonville, Fla.

Florida Atlantic

2021 record: 5-7

A. 27 vs. Charlotte
S. 3 at Ohio
S. 10 vs. Southeastern Louisiana
S. 17 vs. Central Florida
S. 24 at Purdue
O. 1 at North Texas
O. 15 vs. Rice
O. 22 at Texas-El Paso
O. 29 vs. Alabama-Birmingham
N. 12 at Florida International
N. 19 at Middle Tennessee State
N. 26 vs. Western Kentucky

Florida International

2021 record: 1-11

S. 1 vs. Bryant
S. 10 at Texas State
S. 24 at Western Kentucky
O. 1 at New Mexico State
O. 8 vs. Connecticut
O. 14 vs. Texas-San Antonio
O. 22 at Charlotte
O. 28 vs. Louisiana Tech
N. 5 at North Texas
N. 12 vs. Florida Atlantic
N. 19 at Texas-El Paso
N. 26 vs. Middle Tennessee State

Florida State

2021 record: 5-7

A. 27 vs. Duquesne
S. 4 vs. LSU*
S. 16 at Louisville
S. 24 vs. Boston College
O. 1 vs. Wake Forest
O. 8 at N.C. State
O. 15 vs. Clemson
O. 29 vs. Georgia Tech
N. 5 at Miami (Fla.)
N. 12 at Syracuse
N. 19 vs. Louisiana-Lafayette
N. 25 vs. Florida

***New Orleans, La.**

Fresno State

2021 record: 10-3

S. 1 vs. Cal Poly
S. 10 vs. Oregon State
S. 17 at Southern California
O. 1 at Connecticut
O. 8 at Boise State
O. 15 vs. San Jose State
O. 22 at New Mexico
O. 29 vs. San Diego State
N. 5 vs. Hawaii
N. 11 at UNLV
N. 19 at Nevada
N. 25 vs. Wyoming

Georgia

2021 record: 14-1

S. 3 vs. Oregon*
S. 10 vs. Samford
S. 17 at South Carolina
S. 24 vs. Kent State
O. 1 at Missouri
O. 8 vs. Auburn

O. 15 vs. Vanderbilt
O. 29 vs. Florida**
N. 5 vs. Tennessee
N. 12 at Mississippi State
N. 19 at Kentucky
N. 26 vs. Georgia Tech
*Atlanta
**Jacksonville, Fla.

Georgia Southern

2021 record: 3-9

S. 3 vs. Morgan State
S. 10 at Nebraska
S. 17 at Alabama-Birmingham
S. 24 vs. Ball State
O. 1 at Coastal California
O. 8 at Georgia State
O. 15 vs. James Madison
O. 22 at Old Dominion
N. 5 vs. South Alabama
N. 10 at Louisiana-Lafayette
N. 19 vs. Marshall
N. 26 vs. Appalachian State

Georgia State

2021 record: 8-5

S. 3 at South Carolina
S. 10 vs. North Carolina
S. 17 vs. Charlotte
S. 22 vs. Coastal Carolina
O. 1 at Army
O. 8 vs. Georgia Southern
O. 19 at Appalachian State
O. 29 vs. Old Dominion
N. 5 at Southern Mississippi
N. 12 vs. Louisiana-Monroe
N. 19 at James Madison
N. 26 at Marshall

Georgia Tech

2021 record: 3-9

S. 5 vs. Clemson*
S. 10 vs. Western Carolina
S. 17 vs. Mississippi
S. 24 at Central Florida
O. 1 at Pittsburgh
O. 8 vs. Duke
O. 20 vs. Virginia
O. 29 at Florida State
N. 5 at Virginia Tech
N. 12 vs. Miami (Fla.)
N. 19 at North Carolina
N. 26 at Georgia

*Mercedes-Benz Stadium

Hawaii

2021 record: 6-7

A. 27 vs. Vanderbilt
S. 3 vs. Western Kentucky
S. 10 at Michigan
S. 17 vs. Duquesne
S. 24 at New Mexico State
O. 8 at San Diego State
O. 15 vs. Nevada
O. 22 at Colorado State
O. 29 vs. Wyoming
N. 5 at Fresno State
N. 12 vs. Utah State
N. 19 vs. UNLV
N. 26 at San Jose State

Houston

2021 record: 12-2

S. 3 at Texas-San Antonio
S. 10 at Texas Tech
S. 17 vs. Kansas
S. 24 vs. Rice
S. 30 vs. Tulane
O. 7 at Memphis
O. 22 at Navy
O. 29 vs. South Florida
N. 5 at SMU
N. 12 vs. Temple
N. 19 at East Carolina
N. 25 or 26 Tulsa

Illinois

2021 record: 5-7

A. 27 vs. Wyoming
S. 2 at Indiana
S. 10 vs. Virginia
S. 22 vs. Chattanooga
O. 1 at Wisconsin
O. 8 vs. Iowa
O. 15 vs. Minnesota

O. 29 at Nebraska
N. 5 vs. Michigan State
N. 12 vs. Purdue
N. 19 at Michigan
N. 26 at Northwestern
Indiana
2021 record: 2-10
S. 2 vs. Illinois
S. 10 vs. Idaho
S. 17 vs. Western Kentucky
S. 24 at Cincinnati
O. 1 at Nebraska
O. 8 vs. Michigan
O. 15 vs. Maryland
O. 22 at Rutgers
N. 5 vs. Penn State
N. 12 at Ohio State
N. 19 at Michigan State
N. 26 vs. Purdue
Iowa
2021 record: 10-4
S. 3 vs. South Dakota State
S. 10 vs. Iowa State
S. 17 vs. Nevada
S. 24 at Rutgers
O. 1 vs. Michigan
O. 8 at Illinois
O. 22 at Ohio State
O. 29 vs. Northwestern
N. 5 at Purdue
N. 12 vs. Wisconsin
N. 19 at Minnesota
N. 25 vs. Nebraska
Iowa State
2021 record: 7-6
S. 3 vs. Southeast Missouri
S. 10 at Iowa
S. 17 vs. Ohio
S. 24 vs. Baylor
O. 1 at Kansas
O. 8 vs. Kansas State
O. 15 at Texas
O. 29 vs. Oklahoma
N. 5 vs. West Virginia
N. 12 at Oklahoma State
N. 19 vs. Texas Tech
N. 26 at TCU
James Madison
2021 record: 12-2 (in FCS)
S. 3 vs. Middle Tennessee State
S. 10 vs. Norfolk State
S. 24 at Appalachian State
O. 1 vs. Texas State
O. 8 at Arkansas State
O. 15 at Georgia Southern
O. 22 vs. Marshall
N. 5 at Louisville
N. 12 at Old Dominion
N. 19 vs. Georgia State
N. 26 vs. Coastal Carolina
Kansas
2021 record: 2-10
S. 2 vs. Tennessee Tech
S. 10 at West Virginia
S. 17 at Houston
S. 24 vs. Duke
O. 1 vs. Iowa State
O. 8 vs. TCU
O. 15 at Oklahoma
O. 22 at Baylor
N. 5 vs. Oklahoma State
N. 12 at Texas Tech
N. 19 vs. Texas
N. 26 at Kansas State
Kansas State
2021 record: 8-5
S. 3 vs. South Dakota
S. 10 vs. Missouri
S. 17 vs. Tulane
S. 24 at Oklahoma
O. 1 vs. Texas Tech
O. 8 at Iowa State
O. 22 at TCU
O. 29 vs. Oklahoma State
N. 5 vs. Texas
N. 12 at Baylor
N. 19 at West Virginia
N. 26 vs. Kansas

Kent State
2021 record: 7-7
S. 3 at Washington
S. 10 at Oklahoma
S. 17 vs. Long Island
S. 24 at Georgia
O. 1 vs. Ohio
O. 8 at Miami (Ohio)
O. 15 at Toledo
O. 22 vs. Akron
N. 1 vs. Ball State
N. 9 at Bowling Green
N. 16 vs. Eastern Michigan
N. 26 at Buffalo
Kentucky
2021 record: 10-3
S. 3 vs. Miami (Ohio)
S. 10 at Florida
S. 17 vs. Youngstown State
S. 24 vs. Northern Illinois
O. 1 at Mississippi
O. 8 vs. South Carolina
O. 15 vs. Mississippi State
O. 29 at Tennessee
N. 5 at Missouri
N. 12 vs. Vanderbilt
N. 19 vs. Georgia
N. 26 vs. Louisville
Liberty
2021 record: 8-5
S. 3 at Southern Mississippi
S. 10 vs. Alabama-Birmingham
S. 17 at Wake Forest
S. 24 vs. Akron
O. 1 at Old Dominion
O. 8 at Massachussets
O. 15 vs. Gardner-Webb
O. 22 vs. BYU
N. 5 at Arkansas
N. 12 at Connecticut
N. 19 vs. Virginia Tech
N. 26 vs. New Mexico State
Louisiana-Lafayette
2021 record: 13-1
S. 3 vs. Southeastern Louisiana
S. 10 vs. Eastern Michigan
S. 17 at Rice
S. 24 at Louisiana-Monroe
O. 1 vs. South Alabama
O. 12 at Marshall
O. 22 vs. Arkansas State
O. 27 at Southern Mississippi
N. 5 vs. Troy
N. 10 vs. Georgia Southern
N. 19 at Florida State
N. 26 at Texas State
Louisiana-Monroe
2021 record: 4-8
S. 3 at Texas
S. 10 vs. Nicholls
S. 17 at Alabama
S. 24 vs. Louisiana-Lafayette
O. 1 at Arkansas State
O. 8 vs. Coastal Carolina
O. 15 at South Alabama
O. 22 at Army
N. 5 vs. Texas State
N. 12 at Georgia State
N. 19 at Troy
N. 26 vs. Southern Mississippi
LSU
2021 record: 6-7
S. 4 vs. Florida State*
S. 10 vs. Southern
S. 17 vs. Mississippi State
S. 24 vs. New Mexico
O. 1 at Auburn
O. 8 vs. Tennessee
O. 15 at Florida
O. 22 vs. Mississippi
N. 5 vs. Alabama
N. 12 at Arkansas
N. 19 vs. Alabama-Birmingham
N. 26 at Texas A&M
*New Orleans
Louisiana Tech
2021 record: 3-9
S. 1 at Missouri
S. 10 vs. Stephen F. Austin

S. 17 at Clemson
S. 24 at South Alabama
O. 8 vs. Texas-El Paso
O. 15 at North Texas
O. 22 vs. Rice
O. 28 vs. Florida International
N. 5 vs. Middle Tennessee State
N. 12 at Texas-San Antonio
N. 19 at Charlotte
N. 26 vs. Alabama-Birmingham
Louisville
2021 record: 6-7
S. 3 at Syracuse
S. 9 at Central Florida
S. 16 vs. Florida State
S. 24 vs. South Florida
O. 1 at Boston College
O. 8 at Virginia
O. 22 vs. Pittsburgh
O. 29 vs. Wake Forest
N. 5 vs. James Madison
N. 12 at Clemson
N. 19 vs. N.C. State
N. 26 at Kentucky
Marshall
2021 record: 7-6
S. 3 vs. Norfolk State
S. 10 at Notre Dame
S. 17 at Bowling Green
S. 24 at Troy
O. 1 vs. Gardner-Webb
O. 12 vs. Louisiana-Lafayette
O. 22 at James Madison
O. 29 vs. Coastal Carolina
N. 5 at Old Dominion
N. 12 vs. Appalachian State
N. 19 at Georgia Southern
N. 26 vs. Georgia State
Maryland
2021 record: 7-6
S. 3 vs. Buffalo
S. 10 at Charlotte
S. 17 vs. SMU
S. 24 at Michigan
O. 1 vs. Michigan State
O. 8 vs. Purdue
O. 15 at Indiana
O. 22 vs. Northwestern
N. 5 at Wisconsin
N. 12 at Penn State
N. 19 vs. Ohio State
N. 26 vs. Rutgers
Massachusetts
2021 record: 1-11
S. 3 at Tulane
S. 10 at Toledo
S. 17 vs. Stony Brook
S. 24 at Temple
O. 1 at Eastern Michigan
O. 8 vs. Liberty
O. 15 vs. Buffalo
O. 29 vs. New Mexico State
N. 4 at Connecticut
N. 12 at Arkansas State
N. 19 at Texas A&M
N. 26 vs. Army
Memphis
2021 record: 6-6
S. 3 at Mississippi State
S. 10 at Navy
S. 17 vs. Arkansas State
S. 24 vs. North Texas
O. 1 vs. Temple
O. 7 vs. Houston
O. 15 at East Carolina
O. 22 at Tulane
N. 5 vs. Central Florida
N. 10 vs. Tulsa
N. 19 vs. North Alabama
N. 26 at SMU
Miami (Fla.)
2021 record: 7-5
S. 3 vs. Bethune-Cookman
S. 10 vs. Southern Mississippi
S. 17 at Texas A&M
S. 24 vs. Middle Tennessee State
O. 8 vs. North Carolina
O. 15 at Virginia Tech
O. 22 vs. Duke

O. 29 at Virginia
N. 5 vs. Florida State
N. 12 at Georgia Tech
N. 19 at Clemson
N. 26 vs. Pittsburgh
Miami (Ohio)
2021 record: 7-6
S. 3 at Kentucky
S. 10 vs. Robert Morris
S. 17 vs. Cincinnati
S. 24 at Northwestern
O. 1 at Buffalo
O. 8 vs. Kent State
O. 15 at Bowling Green
O. 22 vs. Western Michigan
O. 29 at Akron
N. 8 vs. Ohio
N. 16 at Northern Illinois
O. 22 vs. Ball State
Michigan
2021 record: 12-2
S. 3 vs. Colorado State
S. 10 vs. Hawaii
S. 17 vs. Connecticut
S. 24 vs. Maryland
O. 1 at Iowa
O. 8 at Indiana
O. 15 vs. Penn State
O. 29 vs. Michigan State
N. 5 at Rutgers
N. 12 vs. Nebraska
N. 19 vs. Illinois
N. 26 at Ohio State
Michigan State
2021 record: 11-2
S. 2 vs. Western Michigan
S. 10 vs. Akron
S. 17 at Washington
S. 24 vs. Minnesota
O. 1 at Maryland
O. 8 vs. Ohio State
O. 15 vs. Wisconsin
O. 29 at Michigan
N. 5 at Illinois
N. 12 vs. Rutgers
N. 19 vs. Indiana
N. 26 at Penn State
Middle Tennessee State
2021 record: 7-6
S. 3 at James Madison
S. 10 at Colorado State
S. 17 Tennessee State
S. 24 at Miami (Fla.)
S. 30 Texas-San Antonio
O. 8 at Alabama-Birmingham
O. 15 Western Kentucky
O. 29 at Texas-El Paso
N. 5 at Louisiana Tech
N. 12 Charlotte
N. 19 Florida Atlantic
N. 26 at Florida International
Minnesota
2021 record: 9-4
S. 1 vs. New Mexico State
S. 10 vs. Western Illinois
S. 17 vs. Colorado
S. 24 at Michigan State
O. 1 vs. Purdue
O. 15 at Illinois
O. 22 at Penn State
O. 29 vs. Rutgers
N. 5 at Nebraska
N. 12 vs. Northwestern
N. 19 vs. Iowa
N. 26 at Wisconsin
Mississippi
2021 record: 10-3
S. 3 vs. Troy
S. 10 vs. Central Arkansas
S. 17 at Georgia Tech
S. 24 vs. Tulsa
O. 1 vs. Kentucky
O. 8 at Vanderbilt
O. 15 vs. Auburn
N. 12 at LSU
O. 29 at Texas A&M
N. 12 vs. Alabama
N. 19 at Arkansas
N. 24 vs. Mississippi State

Mississippi State
2021 record: 7-6
S. 3 vs. Memphis
S. 10 at Arizona
S. 17 at LSU
S. 24 vs. Bowling Green
O. 1 vs. Texas A&M
O. 8 vs. Arkansas
O. 15 at Kentucky
O. 22 at Alabama
N. 5 vs. Auburn
N. 12 vs. Georgia
N. 19 vs. East Tennessee State
N. 24 at Mississippi
Missouri
2021 record: 6-7
S. 1 vs. Louisiana Tech
S. 10 at Kansas State
S. 17 vs. Abilene Christian
S. 24 at Auburn
O. 1 vs. Georgia
O. 8 at Florida
O. 22 vs. Vanderbilt
O. 29 at South Carolina
N. 5 vs. Kentucky
N. 12 at Tennessee
N. 19 vs. New Mexico State
N. 25 vs. Arkansas
Navy
2021 record: 4-8
S. 3 vs. Delaware
S. 10 vs. Memphis
S. 24 at East Carolina
O. 1 at Air Force
O. 8 vs. Tulsa
O. 14 at SMU
O. 22 vs. Houston
O. 29 vs. Temple
N. 5 at Cincinnati
N. 12 vs. Notre Dame*
N. 19 at Central Florida
D. 10 vs. Army**
*Baltimore
**Philadelphia
Nebraska
2021 record: 3-9
A. 27 vs. Northwestern*
S. 3 vs. North Dakota
S. 10 vs. Georgia Southern
S. 17 vs. Oklahoma
O. 1 vs. Indiana
O. 7 at Rutgers
O. 15 at Purdue
O. 29 vs. Illinois
N. 5 vs. Minnesota
N. 12 at Michigan
N. 19 vs. Wisconsin
N. 25 at Iowa
*Dublin, Ireland
Nevada
2021 record: 8-5
A. 27 at New Mexico State
S. 3 vs. Texas State
S. 10 vs. Incarnate Word
S. 17 at Iowa
S. 23 at Air Force
O. 7 vs. Colorado State
O. 15 at Hawaii
O. 22 vs. San Diego State
O. 29 at San Jose State
N. 12 vs. Boise State
N. 19 vs. Fresno State
N. 26 at UNLV
New Mexico
2021 record: 3-9
S. 3 vs. Maine
S. 9 vs. Boise State
S. 17 vs. Texas-El Paso
S. 24 at LSU
S. 30 at UNLV
O. 8 vs. Wyoming
O. 15 at New Mexico State
O. 22 vs. Fresno State
N. 5 at Utah State
N. 12 at Air Force
N. 18 vs. San Diego State
N. 25 at Colorado State
New Mexico State
2021 record: 2-10
A. 27 vs. Nevada

S. 1 at Minnesota
S. 10 at Texas-El Paso
S. 17 at Wisconsin
S. 24 vs. Hawaii
O. 1 vs. Florida International
O. 15 vs. New Mexico
O. 22 vs. San Jose State
O. 29 at Massachussets
N. 12 vs. Lamar
N. 19 at Missouri
N. 26 at Liberty
North Carolina
2021 record: 6-7
A. 27 vs. Florida A&M
S. 3 at Appalachian State
S. 10 at Georgia State
S. 24 vs. Notre Dame
O. 1 vs. Virginia Tech
O. 8 at Miami
O. 15 at Duke
O. 29 vs. Pittsburgh
N. 5 at Virginia
N. 12 at Wake Forest
N. 19 vs. Georgia Tech
N. 25 vs. N.C. State
N.C. State
2021 record: 9-3
S. 3 at East Carolina
S. 10 vs. Charleston Southern
S. 17 vs. Texas Tech
S. 24 vs. Connecticut
O. 1 at Clemson
O. 8 vs. Florida State
O. 15 at Syracuse
O. 27 vs. Virginia Tech
N. 5 vs. Wake Forest
N. 12 vs. Boston College
N. 19 at Louisville
N. 25 at North Carolina
North Texas
2021 record: 6-7
A. 27 at Texas-El Paso
S. 3 vs. SMU
S. 10 vs. Texas Southern
S. 17 at UNLV
S. 24 at Memphis
O. 1 vs. Florida Atlantic
O. 15 vs. Louisiana Tech
O. 22 at Texas-San Antonio
O. 29 at Western Kentucky
N. 5 vs. Florida International
N. 12 at Alabama-Birmingham
N. 26 vs. Rice
Northern Illinois
2021 record: 9-5
S. 1 vs. Eastern Illinois
O. 1 at Tulsa
S. 17 vs. Vanderbilt
S. 24 at Kentucky
O. 1 at Ball State
O. 8 vs. Toledo
O. 15 at Eastern Michigan
O. 22 at Ohio
N. 2 vs. Central Michigan
N. 9 at Western Michigan
N. 16 vs. Miami (Ohio)
N. 26 vs. Akron
Northwestern
2021 record: 3-9
A. 27 vs. Nebraska*
S. 10 vs. Duke
S. 17 vs. Southern Illinois
S. 24 vs. Miami (Ohio)
O. 1 at Penn State
O. 8 vs. Wisconsin
O. 22 at Maryland
O. 29 at Iowa
N. 5 vs. Ohio State
N. 12 at Minnesota
N. 19 at Purdue
N. 26 vs. Illinois
*Dublin, Ireland
Notre Dame
2021 record: 11-2
S. 3 at Ohio State
S. 10 vs. Marshall
S. 17 vs. California
S. 24 at North Carolina
O. 8 vs. BYU*
O. 15 vs. Stanford

O. 22 vs. UNLV
O. 29 at Syracuse
N. 5 vs. Clemson
N. 12 vs. Navy**
N. 19 vs. Boston College
N. 26 at Southern California
*Las Vegas
**Baltimore, Md.
Ohio
2021 record: 3-9
S. 3 vs. Florida Atlantic
S. 10 at Penn State
S. 17 at Iowa State
S. 24 vs. Fordham
O. 1 at Kent State
O. 8 vs. Akron
O. 15 at Western Michigan
O. 22 vs. Northern Illinois
N. 1 vs. Buffalo
N. 8 at Miami (Ohio)
N. 15 at Ball State
N. 22 vs. Bowling Green
Ohio State
2021 record: 11-2
S. 3 vs. Notre Dame
S. 10 vs. Arkansas State
S. 17 vs. Toledo
S. 24 vs. Wisconsin
O. 1 vs. Rutgers
O. 8 at Michigan State
O. 22 vs. Iowa
O. 29 at Penn State
N. 5 at Northwestern
N. 12 vs. Indiana
N. 19 at Maryland
N. 26 vs. Michigan
Oklahoma
2021 record: 11-2
S. 3 vs. Texas-El Paso
S. 10 vs. Kent State
S. 17 at Nebraska
S. 24 vs. Kansas State
O. 1 at TCU
O. 8 vs. Texas*
O. 15 vs. Kansas
O. 29 at Iowa State
N. 5 vs. Baylor
N. 12 at West Virginia
N. 19 vs. Oklahoma State
N. 26 at Texas Tech
*Dallas
Oklahoma State
2021 record: 12-2
S. 1 vs. Central Michigan
S. 10 vs. Arizona State
S. 17 vs. Ark.-Pine Bluff
O. 1 at Baylor
O. 8 vs. Texas Tech
O. 15 at TCU
O. 22 vs. Texas
O. 29 at Kansas State
N. 5 at Kansas
N. 12 vs. Iowa State
N. 19 at Oklahoma
N. 26 vs. West Virginia
Old Dominion
2021 record: 6-7
S. 2 vs. Virginia Tech
S. 10 at East Carolina
S. 17 at Virginia
S. 24 vs. Arkansas State
O. 1 vs. Liberty
O. 15 at Coastal Carolina
O. 22 vs. Georgia Southern
O. 29 at Georgia State
N. 5 vs. Marshall
N. 12 vs. James Madison
N. 19 at Appalachian State
N. 26 at South Alabama
Oregon
2021 record: 10-4
S. 3 vs. Georgia*
S. 10 vs. Eastern Washington
S. 17 vs. BYU
S. 24 at Washington State
O. 1 vs. Stanford
O. 8 at Arizona
O. 22 vs. UCLA
O. 29 at California
N. 5 at Colorado

N. 12 vs. Washington
N. 19 vs. Utah
N. 26 at Oregon State
***Atlanta**
Oregon State
2021 record: 7-6
S. 3 vs. Boise State
S. 10 at Fresno State
S. 17 vs. Montana State*
S. 24 vs. Southern California
O. 1 at Utah
O. 8 at Stanford
O. 15 vs. Washington State
O. 22 vs. Colorado
N. 4 at Washington
N. 12 vs. California
N. 19 at Arizona State
N. 26 vs. Oregon
*Portland, Ore.
Penn State
2021 record: 7-6
S. 1 at Purdue
S. 10 vs. Ohio
S. 17 at Auburn
S. 24 vs. Central Michigan
O. 1 vs. Northwestern
O. 15 at Michigan
O. 22 vs. Minnesota
O. 29 vs. Ohio State
N. 5 at Indiana
N. 12 vs. Maryland
N. 19 at Rutgers
N. 26 vs. Michigan State
Pittsburgh
2021 record: 11-3
S. 1 vs. West Virginia
S. 10 vs. Tennessee
S. 17 at Western Michigan
S. 24 vs. Rhode Island
O. 1 vs. Georgia Tech
O. 8 vs. Virginia Tech
O. 22 at Louisville
O. 29 at North Carolina
N. 5 vs. Syracuse
N. 12 at Virginia
N. 19 vs. Duke
N. 26 at Miami (Fla.)
Purdue
2021 record: 9-4
S. 1 vs. Penn State
S. 10 vs. Indiana State
S. 17 at Syracuse
S. 24 vs. Florida Atlantic
O. 1 at Minnesota
O. 8 at Maryland
O. 15 vs. Nebraska
O. 22 at Wisconsin
N. 5 vs. Iowa
N. 12 at Illinois
N. 19 vs. Northwestern
N. 26 at Indiana
Rice
2021 record: 4-8
S. 3 at Southern California
S. 10 vs. McNeese State
S. 17 vs. Louisiana-Lafayette
S. 24 at Houston
O. 1 vs. Alabama-Birmingham
O. 15 at Florida Atlantic
O. 22 at Louisiana Tech
O. 29 vs. Charlotte
N. 3 vs. Texas-El Paso
N. 12 at Western Kentucky
N. 19 vs. Texas-San Antonio
N. 26 at North Texas
Rutgers
2021 schedule: 5-8
S. 3 at Boston College
S. 10 vs. Wagner
S. 17 at Temple
S. 24 vs. Iowa
O. 1 at Ohio State
O. 7 vs. Nebraska
O. 22 vs. Indiana
O. 29 at Minnesota
N. 5 vs. Michigan
N. 12 at Michigan State
N. 19 vs. Penn State
N. 26 at Maryland

San Diego State
2021 record: 12-2
S. 3 vs. Arizona
S. 10 vs. Idaho State
S. 17 at Utah
S. 24 vs. Toledo
S. 30 at Boise State
O. 8 vs. Hawaii
O. 22 at Nevada
O. 29 at Fresno State
N. 5 vs. UNLV
N. 12 vs. San Jose State
N. 19 at New Mexico
N. 26 vs. Air Force
San Jose State
2021 record: 5-7
S. 1 vs. Portland State
S. 10 at Auburn
S. 24 vs. Western Michigan
O. 1 at Wyoming
O. 7 vs. UNLV
O. 15 at Fresno State
O. 22 at New Mexico State
O. 29 vs. Nevada
N. 5 vs. Colorado State
N. 12 at San Diego State
N. 19 at Utah State
N. 26 vs. Hawaii
South Alabama
2021 record: 5-7
S. 3 vs. Nicholls
S. 10 at Central Michigan
S. 17 at UCLA
S. 24 vs. Louisiana Tech
O. 1 at Louisiana-Lafayette
O. 15 vs. Louisiana-Monroe
O. 20 vs. Troy
O. 29 at Arkansas State
N. 5 at Georgia Southern
N. 12 vs. Texas State
N. 19 at Southern Mississippi
N. 26 vs. Old Dominion
South Carolina
2021 record: 7-6
S. 3 vs. Georgia State
S. 10 at Arkansas
S. 17 vs. Georgia
S. 24 vs. Charlotte
O. 1 vs. South Carolina State
O. 8 at Kentucky
O. 22 vs. Texas A&M
O. 29 vs. Missouri
N. 5 at Vanderbilt
N. 12 at Florida
N. 19 vs. Tennessee
N. 26 at Clemson
South Florida
2021 record: 2-10
S. 3 vs. BYU
S. 10 vs. Howard
S. 17 at Florida
S. 24 at Louisville
O. 1 vs. East Carolina
O. 8 at Cincinnati
O. 15 vs. Tulane
O. 29 at Houston
N. 5 at Temple
N. 12 vs. SMU
N. 18 at Tulsa
N. 25 vs. Central Florida
Southern California
2021 record: 4-8
S. 3 vs. Rice
S. 10 at Stanford
S. 17 vs. Fresno State
S. 24 at Oregon State
O. 1 vs. Arizona State
O. 8 vs. Washington State
O. 15 at Utah
O. 29 at Arizona
N. 5 vs. California
N. 11 vs. Colorado
N. 19 at UCLA
N. 26 vs. Notre Dame
SMU
2021 record: 8-4
S. 3 at North Texas
S. 10 vs. Lamar
S. 17 at Maryland

S. 24 vs. TCU
O. 1 at Central Florida
O. 14 vs. Navy
O. 22 vs. Cincinnati
O. 29 at Tulsa
N. 5 vs. Houston
N. 12 at South Florida
N. 17 at Tulane
N. 26 vs. Memphis
Southern Mississippi
2021 record: 3-9
S. 3 vs. Liberty
S. 10 at Miami (Fla.)
S. 17 vs. Northwestern State
S. 24 at Tulane
O. 8 at Troy
O. 15 vs. Arkansas State
O. 22 at Texas State
O. 27 vs. Louisiana-Lafayette
N. 5 vs. Georgia State
N. 12 at Coastal Carolina
N. 19 vs. South Alabama
N. 26 at Louisiana-Monroe
Stanford
2021 record: 3-9
S. 3 vs. Colgate
S. 10 vs. Southern California
S. 24 at Washington
O. 1 at Oregon
O. 8 vs. Oregon State
O. 15 at Notre Dame
O. 22 vs. Arizona State
O. 29 at UCLA
N. 5 vs. Washington State
N. 12 at Utah
N. 19 at California
N. 26 vs. BYU
Syracuse
2021 record: 5-7
S. 3 vs. Louisville
S. 10 at Connecticut
S. 17 vs. Purdue
S. 23 vs. Virginia
O. 1 vs. Wagner
O. 15 vs. N.C. State
O. 22 at Clemson
O. 29 vs. Notre Dame
N. 5 at Pittsburgh
N. 12 vs. Florida State
N. 19 at Wake Forest
N. 26 at Boston College
Temple
2021 record: 3-9
S. 2 at Duke
S. 10 vs. Lafayette
S. 17 vs. Rutgers
S. 24 vs. Massachussets
O. 1 at Memphis
O. 13 at Central Florida
O. 21 vs. Tulsa
O. 29 at Navy
N. 5 vs. South Florida
N. 12 at Houston
N. 19 vs. Cincinnati
N. 26 vs. East Carolina
Tennessee
2021 record: 7-6
S. 1 vs. Ball State
S. 10 at Pittsburgh
S. 17 vs. Akron
S. 24 vs. Florida
O. 8 at LSU
O. 15 vs. Alabama
O. 22 vs. UT-Martin
O. 29 vs. Kentucky
N. 5 at Georgia
N. 12 vs. Missouri
N. 19 at South Carolina
N. 26 at Vanderbilt
Texas
2021 schedule: 5-7
S. 3 vs. Louisiana-Monroe
S. 10 vs. Alabama
S. 17 vs. Texas-San Antonio
S. 24 at Texas Tech
O. 1 vs. West Virginia
O. 8 vs. Oklahoma*
O. 15 vs. Iowa State
O. 22 at Oklahoma State

N. 5 at Kansas State
N. 12 vs. TCU
N. 19 at Kansas
N. 25 vs. Baylor
*Dallas
Texas A&M
2021 record: 8-4
S. 3 vs. Sam Houston State
S. 10 vs. Appalachian State
S. 17 vs. Miami (Fla.)
S. 24 vs. Arkansas*
O. 1 at Mississippi State
O. 8 at Alabama
O. 22 at South Carolina
O. 29 vs. Mississippi
N. 5 vs. Florida
N. 12 at Auburn
N. 19 vs. Massachussets
N. 26 vs. LSU
***Arlington, Texas**
TCU
2021 record: 5-7
S. 2 at Colorado
S. 10 vs. Tarleton
S. 24 at SMU
O. 1 vs. Oklahoma
O. 8 at Kansas
O. 15 vs. Oklahoma State
O. 22 vs. Kansas State
O. 29 at West Virginia
N. 5 vs. Texas Tech
N. 12 at Texas
N. 19 at Baylor
N. 26 vs. Iowa State
Texas State
2021 record: 4-8
S. 3 at Nevada
S. 10 vs. Florida International
S. 17 at Baylor
S. 24 vs. Houston Baptist
O. 1 at James Madison
O. 8 vs. Appalachian State
O. 15 at Troy
O. 22 vs. Southern Mississippi
N. 5 at Louisiana-Monroe
N. 12 at South Alabama
N. 19 vs. Arkansas State
N. 26 vs. Louisiana-Lafayette
Texas Tech
2021 record: 7-6
S. 3 vs. Murray State
S. 10 vs. Houston
S. 17 at N.C. State
S. 24 vs. Texas
O. 1 at Kansas State
O. 8 at Oklahoma State
O. 2 vs. West Virginia
O. 29 vs. Baylor
N. 5 at TCU
N. 12 vs. Kansas
N. 19 at Iowa State
N. 26 vs. Oklahoma
Texas-El Paso
2021 record: 7-6
A. 27 vs. North Texas
S. 3 at Oklahoma
S. 10 vs. New Mexico State
S. 17 at New Mexico
S. 23 vs. Boise State
O. 1 at Charlotte
O. 8 at Louisiana Tech
O. 22 vs. Florida Atlantic
O. 29 vs. Middle Tennessee State
N. 3 at Rice
N. 19 vs. Florida International
N. 26 at Texas-San Antonio
Texas-San Antonio
2021 record: 12-2
S. 3 vs. Houston
S. 10 at Army
S. 17 at Texas
S. 24 vs. Texas Southern
S. 30 at Middle Tennessee State
O. 8 at Western Kentucky
O. 14 at Florida International
O. 22 vs. North Texas
N. 5 at Alabama-Birmingham
O. 15 vs. Louisiana Tech
N. 19 at Rice
N. 26 vs. Texas-El Paso

Toledo
2021 record: 7-6
S. 1 vs. Long Island
S. 10 vs. Massachussets
S. 17 at Ohio State
S. 24 at San Diego State
O. 1 vs. Central Michigan
O. 8 at Northern Illinois
O. 15 vs. Kent State
O. 22 at Buffalo
O. 29 at Eastern Michigan
N. 8 vs. Ball State
N. 15 vs. Bowling Green
N. 25 at Western Michigan
Troy
2021 record: 5-7
S. 3 at Mississippi
S. 10 vs. Alabama A&M
S. 17 at Appalachian State
S. 24 vs. Marshall
O. 1 at Western Kentucky
O. 8 vs. Southern Mississippi
O. 15 vs. Texas State
O. 20 at South Alabama
N. 5 at Louisiana-Lafayette
N. 12 vs. Army
N. 19 vs. Louisiana-Monroe
N. 26 at Arkansas State
Tulane
2021 record: 2-10
S. 3 vs. Massachussets
S. 10 vs. Alcorn State
S. 17 at Kansas State
S. 24 vs. Southern Mississippi
S. 30 at Houston
O. 8 vs. East Carolina
O. 15 at South Florida
O. 22 vs. Memphis
N. 5 at Tulsa
N. 12 vs. Central Florida
N. 17 vs. SMU
N. 26 at Cincinnati
Tulsa
2021 record: 7-6
S. 3 at Wyoming
S. 10 vs. Northern Illinois
S. 17 vs. Jacksonville State
S. 24 at Mississippi
O. 1 vs. Cincinnati
O. 8 at Navy
O. 21 at Temple
O. 29 vs. SMU
N. 5 vs. Tulane
N. 10 at Memphis
N. 18 vs. South Florida
N. 25 or 26 at Houston
UCLA
2021 record: 8-4
S. 3 vs. Bowling Green
S. 10 vs. Alabama State
S. 17 vs. South Alabama
S. 24 at Colorado
S. 30 vs. Washington
O. 8 vs. Utah
O. 22 at Oregon
O. 29 vs. Stanford
N. 5 at Arizona State
N. 12 vs. Arizona
N. 19 vs. Southern California
N. 25 at California
UNLV
2021 record: 2-10
A. 27 vs. Idaho State
S. 10 at California
S. 17 vs. North Texas
S. 24 at Utah State
S. 30 vs. New Mexico
O. 7 at San Jose State
O. 15 vs. Air Force
O. 22 at Notre Dame
N. 5 at San Diego State
N. 11 vs. Fresno State
N. 19 at Hawaii
N. 26 vs. Nevada
Utah
2021 record: 10-4
S. 3 at Florida
S. 10 vs. Southern Utah
S. 17 vs. San Diego State

S. 24 at Arizona State
O. 1 vs. Oregon State
O. 8 at UCLA
O. 15 vs. Southern California
O. 27 at Washington State
N. 5 vs. Arizona
N. 12 vs. Stanford
N. 19 at Oregon
N. 26 at Colorado
Utah State
2021 record: 11-3
A. 27 vs. Connecticut
S. 3 at Alabama
S. 10 vs. Weber State
S. 24 vs. UNLV
S. 29 at BYU
O. 8 vs. Air Force
O. 15 at Colorado State
O. 22 at Wyoming
N. 5 vs. New Mexico
N. 12 at Hawaii
N. 19 vs. San Jose State
N. 25 at Boise State
Vanderbilt
2021 record: 2-10
A. 27 at Hawaii
S. 3 vs. Elon
S. 10 vs. Wake Forest
S. 17 at Northern Illinois
S. 24 at Alabama
O. 8 vs. Mississippi
O. 15 at Georgia
O. 22 at Missouri
N. 5 vs. South Carolina
N. 12 at Kentucky
N. 19 vs. Florida
N. 26 vs. Tennessee
Virginia
2021 record: 6-6
S. 3 vs. Richmond
S. 10 at Illinois
S. 17 vs. Old Dominion
S. 23 at Syracuse
O. 1 at Duke
O. 8 vs. Louisville
O. 20 at Georgia Tech
O. 29 vs. Miami (Fla.)
N. 5 vs. North Carolina
N. 12 vs. Pittsburgh
N. 19 vs. Coastal Carolina
N. 26 at Virginia Tech
Virginia Tech
2021 record: 6-7
S. 2 at Old Dominion
S. 10 vs. Boston College
S. 17 vs. Wofford
S. 22 vs. West Virginia
O. 1 at North Carolina
O. 8 at Pittsburgh
O. 15 vs. Miami (Fla.)
O. 27 at N.C. State
N. 5 vs. Georgia Tech
N. 12 at Duke
N. 19 at Liberty
N. 26 vs. Virginia
Wake Forest
2021 record: 11-3
S. 1 vs. VMI
S. 10 at Vanderbilt
S. 17 vs. Liberty
S. 24 vs. Clemson
O. 1 at Florida State
O. 8 vs. Army
O. 22 vs. Boston College
O. 29 at Louisville
N. 5 at N.C. State
N. 12 vs. North Carolina
N. 19 vs. Syracuse
N. 26 at Duke
Washington
2021 record: 4-8
S. 3 vs. Kent State
S. 10 vs. Portland State
S. 17 vs. Michigan State
S. 24 vs. Stanford
S. 30 at UCLA
O. 8 at Arizona State
O. 15 vs. Arizona
O. 22 at California

N. 4 vs. Oregon State
N. 12 at Oregon
N. 19 vs. Colorado
N. 26 at Washington State
Washington State
2021 record: 7-6
S. 3 vs. Idaho
S. 10 at Wisconsin
S. 17 vs. Colorado State
S. 24 vs. Oregon
O. 1 vs. California
O. 8 at Southern California
O. 15 at Oregon State
O. 27 vs. Utah
N. 5 at Stanford
N. 12 vs. Arizona State
N. 19 at Arizona
N. 26 vs. Washington
West Virginia
2021 record: 6-7
S. 1 at Pittsburgh
S. 10 vs. Kansas
S. 17 vs. Towson
S. 22 at Virginia Tech
O. 1 at Texas
O. 13 vs. Baylor
O. 22 at Texas Tech
O. 29 vs. TCU
N. 5 at Iowa State
N. 12 vs. Oklahoma
N. 19 vs. Kansas State
N. 26 at Oklahoma State
Western Kentucky
2021 record: 9-5
A. 27 vs. Austin Peay
S. 3 at Hawaii
S. 17 at Indiana
S. 24 vs. Florida International
O. 1 vs. Troy
O. 8 at Texas-San Antonio
O. 15 at Middle Tennessee State
O. 21 vs. Alabama-Birmingham
O. 29 vs. North Texas
N. 5 at Charlotte
N. 12 vs. Rice
N. 19 at Auburn
N. 26 at Atlanta Atlantic
Western Michigan
2021 record: 8-5
S. 2 at Michigan State
S. 10 at Ball State
S. 17 vs. Pittsburgh
S. 24 at San Jose State
O. 1 vs. New Hampshire
O. 8 vs. Eastern Michigan
O. 15 vs. Ohio
O. 22 at Miami (Ohio)
N. 2 at Bowling Green
N. 9 vs. Northern Illinois
N. 16 at Central Michigan
N. 25 vs. Toledo
Wisconsin
2021 record: 9-4
S. 3 Illinois State
S. 10 Washington State
S. 17 New Mexico State
S. 24 at Ohio State
O. 1 Illinois
O. 8 at Northwestern
O. 15 at Michigan State
O. 22 Purdue
N. 5 Maryland
N. 12 at Iowa
N. 19 at Nebraska
N. 26 Minnesota
Wyoming
2021 record: 7-6
A. 27 at Illinois
S. 3 vs. Tulsa
S. 10 vs. Northern Colorado
S. 16 vs. Air Force
O. 24 at BYU
O. 1 vs. San Jose State
O. 8 at New Mexico
O. 22 vs. Utah State
O. 29 at Hawaii
N. 12 at Colorado State
N. 19 vs. Boise State
N. 25 at Fresno State



BOWL SCHEDULE

The Rose Bowl won't host the College Football Playoff this season. It will be held Jan. 2 and feature its traditional matchup: A Big Ten vs. a Pac-12 school.

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SPORTS

Date	Bowl	Matchup	Location	TV, time (p.m. Eastern)	Prediction
Dec. 16	Bahamas	Conference USA vs. MAC	Nassau, Bahamas	ESPN, 11:30 a.m.	Florida Atlantic vs. Miami (Ohio)
Dec. 16	Cure	Group of Five vs. Group of Five	Orlando, Fla.	ESPN, 3	Eastern Michigan vs. Troy
Dec. 17	Fenway	ACC vs. American	Boston	ESPN, 11 a.m.	Pittsburgh vs. East Carolina
Dec. 17	New Mexico	Mountain West vs. Group of Five	Albuquerque, N.M.	ESPN, 2:15	Boise State vs. Louisiana-Lafayette
Dec. 17	LA	Mountain West vs. Pac-12	Inglewood, Calif.	ABC, 3:30	Fresno State vs. Southern Cal
Dec. 17	LendingTree	Conference USA/MAC/Sun Belt	Mobile, Ala.	ESPN, 5:45	North Texas vs. Kent State
Dec. 17	Las Vegas	Pac-12 vs. SEC	Las Vegas	ABC, 7:30	UCLA vs. Mississippi State
Dec. 17	Frisco	Group of Five vs. Group of Five	Frisco, Texas	ESPN, 9:15	Wyoming vs. Bowling Green
Dec. 19	Myrtle Beach	Conference USA/MAC/Sun Belt	Conway, S.C.	ESPN, 2:30	Alabama-Birmingham vs. Marshall
Dec. 20	Idaho Potato	MAC vs. Mountain West	Boise, Idaho	ESPN, 3:30	Northern Illinois vs. Utah State
Dec. 20	Boca Raton	Group of Five vs. Group of Five	Boca Raton, Fla.	ESPN, 7:30	Coastal Carolina vs. Nevada
Dec. 21	New Orleans	Conference USA vs. Sun Belt	New Orleans	ESPN, 9	Texas-San Antonio vs. Appalachian State
Dec. 22	Armed Forces	American vs. Conference USA	Fort Worth, Texas	ESPN, 7:30	SMU vs. Texas-El Paso
Dec. 23	Gasparilla	ACC/American/SEC	Tampa, Fla.	ESPN, TBA	North Carolina vs. Tulsa
Dec. 23	Independence	Army vs. American	Shreveport, La.	ESPN, TBA	Army vs. Memphis
Dec. 24	Hawaii	Conference USA vs. Mountain West	Honolulu	ESPN, 8	Western Kentucky vs. San Diego State
Dec. 26	Quick Lane	Big Ten vs. MAC	Detroit	ESPN, 2:30	Nebraska vs. Toledo
Dec. 27	Camellia	Conference USA/MAC/Sun Belt	Montgomery, Ala.	ESPN, noon	Central Michigan vs. Georgia State
Dec. 27	Guaranteed Rate	Big 12 vs. Big Ten	Phoenix	ESPN, 10:15	Kansas State vs. Minnesota
Dec. 27	First Responder	Big 12 vs. at-large	Dallas	ESPN, TBA	West Virginia vs. Washington State
Dec. 27	Birmingham	American vs. SEC	Birmingham, Ala.	ESPN, TBA	Central Florida vs. LSU
Dec. 28	Military	ACC vs. American	Annapolis, Md.	ESPN, 2	Louisville vs. Cincinnati
Dec. 28	Liberty	Big 12 vs. SEC	Memphis, Tenn.	ESPN, 5:30	Texas vs. Kentucky
Dec. 28	Texas	Big 12 vs. SEC	Houston	ESPN, 9	TCU vs. Auburn
Dec. 29	Pinstripe	ACC vs. Big Ten	Bronx, N.Y.	ESPN, 2	Syracuse vs. Purdue
Dec. 29	Cheez-It	ACC vs. Big 12	Orlando, Fla.	ESPN, 5:30	North Carolina State vs. Kansas State
Dec. 29	Alamo	Big 12 vs. Pac-12	San Antonio	ESPN, 9	Baylor vs. Oregon State
Dec. 30	Duke's Mayo	ACC vs. Big Ten	Charlotte, N.C.	ESPN, noon	Florida State vs. Michigan State
Dec. 30	Sun	ACC vs. Pac-12	El Paso, Texas	CBS, 2	Virginia Tech vs. Washington
Dec. 30	Gator	ACC vs. SEC	Jacksonville, Fla.	ESPN, 3:30	Miami (Fla.) vs. Mississippi
Dec. 30	Arizona	MAC vs. Mountain West	Tucson, Ariz.	Barstool, 4:30	Western Michigan vs. Air Force
Dec. 30	Orange	ACC vs. Big Ten/SEC	Miami Gardens, Fla.	ESPN, 8	Clemson vs. Wisconsin
Dec. 31	Music City	Big Ten vs. SEC	Nashville, Tenn.	ABC, noon	Iowa vs. Florida
Dec. 31	Sugar	Big 12 vs. SEC	New Orleans	ESPN, noon	Oklahoma State vs. Texas A&M
Dec. 31	Fiesta	College Football Playoff semifinal	Glendale, Ariz.	ESPN, 4 or 8	Ohio State vs. Georgia
Dec. 31	Peach	College Football Playoff semifinal	Atlanta	ESPN, 4 or 8	Alabama vs. Oklahoma
Jan. 2	ReliaQuest	Big Ten/ACC vs. SEC	Tampa, Fla.	ESPN2, noon	Notre Dame vs. Tennessee
Jan. 2	Citrus	Big Ten vs. SEC	Orlando, Fla.	ABC, 1	Penn State vs. Arkansas
Jan. 2	Cotton	At-large vs. At-large	Arlington, Texas	ESPN, 1	Brigham Young vs. Houston
Jan. 2	Rose	Big Ten vs. Pac-12	Pasadena, Calif.	ESPN, 5	Michigan vs. Utah
Jan. 9	CFP championship game	Semifinals winners	Inglewood, Calif.	ESPN, 8	Alabama vs. Ohio State
TBA	Holiday	ACC vs. Pac-12	San Diego	Fox, TBA	Wake Forest vs. Oregon

FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP SUBDIVISION

Missouri State QB does not dwell on past

Toyloy Brown III

USA TODAY

Missouri State was down by four with 2:06 left in the fourth quarter. Central Arkansas, which started the quarter trailing by nine, scored three touchdowns and was a defensive stop away from spoiling the Bears' 2021 home opener.

"Usually I would go over and say, 'All right, fellas, we're going to take this down and score,'" said Bobby Petrino, head coach of Missouri State.

But Jason Shelley, the quarterback transfer from Utah State playing his second game with the team, galvanized his teammates before his coach had a chance.

"I started to walk over to the offense and Jason was standing there saying, 'We got this, guys. We're going to take it down and score and win the game,'" Petrino said.

Shelley, who didn't have a touchdown pass to that point, threw a 26-yard dart for a score that gave the Bears a three-point lead after the extra point. With that touchdown and a pick-six on the ensuing Central Arkansas drive, Missouri State got its first win of the season, 43-34.

"That's nice to have, someone who has that much confidence in himself and his teammates," Petrino said.

Shelley was the Missouri Valley Football Conference Offensive Player of the Year and Newcomer of the Year last season after breaking the program records in passing yards and yards of total offense.

Similar to most high-achieving quarterbacks, Shelley raises the game of those around him. His presence helped a Bears team that went 5-5 in 2020-21 go 8-4 last season. Behind Shelley, the Bears are expected to be among the top FCS teams this fall.

However, unlike many signal-callers, the senior who commands the sideline is quiet by nature.



Jason Shelley was named MVC Offensive Player and Newcomer of the Year after breaking Missouri State records in passing yards (3,347) and total offense (3,789). ANDREW JANSEN/NEWS-LEADER

"I'm more of an introverted person. It's kind of crazy to say (about) a quarterback," Shelley said. "When you see me at an IHOP or something like that, you'll probably be like, 'He's not the same rowdy guy he is on the field.' That's not me at all."

Shelley, who grew up in Frisco, Texas, is in fact the quietest person in his family between his parents, his older sister and his younger brother, his parents said.

"When he puts his helmet on and shoulder pads on, he transforms into a different person,"

said his dad, Jason Sr., who played wide receiver in NFL Europe, the XFL and the Arena Football League (AFL).

Shelley said he has fond memories of watching his dad play football in the AFL up until he was 10.

While he was the starting quarterback at Lone Star High School, he also pursued his second love: baseball, playing on the varsity team for four years. His time as an outfielder helped him mentally on the gridiron.

"Baseball definitely touched on mental toughness. You can

go a week and not even touch the baseball at all, strike out every time," Shelley said. "That's something you got to learn growing up that the past is the past, you can't change it, you got to move forward."

Leaving the past behind and moving forward from struggles has been a central part of Shelley's college experience. He used that lesson when he went through a difficult situation earlier in his career.

After redshirting in 2017 and playing two seasons at the University of Utah – starting at quarterback for the final five games of 2018 and appearing in 11 games in 2019 – Shelley transferred to Utah State to be the full-time starter.

His time with the Aggies was short-lived. Gary Andersen, the head coach who recruited Shelley, was fired early in the season. After the 0-4 start, tensions were high and Shelley and a teammate got into a verbal argument on the sideline that continued into the locker room. The following morning, then-interim head coach Frank Maile dismissed Shelley and told the media he violated a team rule. Maile later explained there was no rule broken.

Even with the correction, Shelley's reputation took a hit, and he didn't know where his next football opportunity was going to come from.

"They (the Utah State football program) tried to sully his name," Jason Sr. said. "They tried to do some damage to my son that was unwarranted. He definitely persevered through that. He did show a lot of mental toughness."

Shelley said this situation challenged his resolve, creeping in some doubt about if he could be a quarterback at the next level one day. "I had to look myself in the mirror," he said.

"I've always wanted to be a professional football player. When that happened, I kind of seen the light dimming a little bit in my eyes. The day it happened I can remember like yes-

terday, where I parted ways with the team because I didn't even expect it and it happened the next morning. So (I learned) you can't really take anything for granted."

To graduate and be eligible to transfer after that spring 2021 semester, he needed 23 credits.

"Get that degree, they cannot take that from you," Janine Shelley told her son at the time.

Shelley took his mom's words seriously and used his newfound time away from the game to do what he needed to graduate and move on to Missouri State.

"The thing that impressed me the most when he got here was how quickly he learned," Petrino said.

Shelley learned Petrino's offense after already knowing the playbooks from Utah and Utah State.

"He has a master's degree in (learning offenses)," Petrino said. "It's amazing what he could do as far as picking up our offense, understanding it and then executing it. He can picture things so when you speak to him and you say 'Cover 2,' you can see that he pictures that in his mind. And when you can do that as a quarterback, then it's so much easier during the game to make adjustments."

The same visualization technique he uses to dissect opposing defenses is what he uses to approach his day-to-day. He said he believes that "if you can see it happening, you know it's possible."

The proficiency Shelley has in the way he thinks about the game is what has allowed him to overcome any lingering doubts about him as a 5-foot-11 quarterback. He also matured to understand that if what he envisioned doesn't happen, such as the Utah State situation, he is not going to carry misgivings.

"I think that people who do live with regrets are always living in fear, and I think that living in fear prevents you from being the best person you can be," Shelley said.

FCS STORYLINES

JMU relishes chance to bring its brand to FBS

Kaleb Anderson

USA TODAY

James Madison's move to the Sun Belt Conference became official July 1. With this transition comes a big adjustment and higher expectations, specifically in football.

"We're the first team to make this transition in one year," says head coach Curt Cignetti. "All the other teams that have done this have done it over a two-year period and played maybe half FCS and half FBS."

Although the Dukes won't be eligible for the conference championship or a bowl game this season, they will be playing a full FBS conference schedule.

"We have a very strong brand here, a championship brand ... so we're confident that we're going to be highly competitive," Cignetti says.

The Dukes enter the Sun Belt following a 12-2 season in their final year in the FCS and Colonial Athletic Association.

Cignetti is entering his fourth season with James Madison with a 33-5 record, three CAA championships and an FCS national title game appearance in 2019.

Senior wide receiver Kris Thornton is coming off a season in which he had 83 catches, 1,097 yards and 13 touchdowns.

"As a team, we're definitely excited. We're ready to go and show everybody what we're made of," Thornton said.

In addition to making the adjustment to a new conference, Thornton finds himself as one of the older voices in the locker room.

"If a young receiver or new player is looking for some kind of advice or some help on the playbook, I'm trying to be there for the younger guys," he says.

Thornton is hardly the only veteran presence in the locker room. Graduate student and starting running back Percy Agyei-Obese is going into his sixth season with the program, ranking fourth all time for JMU in rushing touchdowns (31) and ninth all time in rushing yards (2,595). Through all the changes, the goal for the program has remained the same.

"I've definitely seen a lot of transitions throughout the program, but one thing that's always stayed the same is the JMU football mindset," Agyei-Obese says. "We have a brotherhood; we're going to play our best ball every game any time, anywhere and any place."

When asked what the Sun Belt should expect from the Dukes, Cignetti, Thornton and Agyei-Obese were all in accord.



"I'm definitely excited," says senior receiver Kris Thornton. "Since I've been at JMU, I haven't been able to play an FBS game."

LEE COLEMAN, ICON SPORTSWIRE VIA GETTY IMAGES

"The typical JMU football team dating back to 2016 has been a fast, physical football team that plays relentlessly. ... We're stepping into a new era and realize there could be some growing pains but we're not going in setting self-imposing limitations," Cignetti said.

"We're going to play our brand of football," Thornton said. "We're really balanced on offense so we're going to run the ball and throw the ball and our defense is going to fly around."

Howard to stay in the MEAC

After entertaining the idea of a confer-

ence transfer for a couple of months, Howard has decided to decline an invitation to the Colonial Athletic Association and will remain in the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference. Howard engaged in serious talks to join the CAA in the 2023-24 season.

The CAA was pursuing Howard and North Carolina A&T following the departure of James Madison to the Sun Belt.

The decision of Howard, a founding member of the conference, is crucial to the future on the MEAC. In recent years, the conference has lost Florida A&M, Bethune-Cookman, Hampton and Savannah State. It will lose North Carolina

A&T's football program in 2023.

Conference realignments

North Alabama and 2021 Big South champion Kennesaw State are both departing the Big South for the ASUN Conference. Monmouth and Hampton are also leaving the Big South to join the Colonial Athletic Association. Bryant is leaving the Northeast Conference to join the Big South.

The Western Athletic Conference gains Southern Utah from the Big Sky while Austin Peay is leaving the Ohio Valley for the ASUN.

Which HBCU has shot at beating the FBS?

Khari Thompson

Mississippi Clarion Ledger

Jackson State is one of six Division I HBCUs that was not scheduled to face a Football Bowl Subdivision opponent this season. Coach Deion Sanders said after last season's loss to Louisiana-Monroe that he doesn't believe in taking money from an FBS school in order to get beaten. The Louisiana-Monroe loss was JSU's only loss of the regular season.

HBCU's are typically huge underdogs in games against FBS opponents. It has been four years since an HBCU has beaten an FBS opponent, according to NCAA.com. But there have been a few notable upsets in the past few years.

In 2018, North Carolina A&T beat East Carolina en route to winning the third of its four Celebration Bowl (champions of MEAC vs. SWAC) titles. Howard beat UNLV in 2017 with Cam Newton's younger brother, Caylin Newton, playing quarterback. Tennessee State beat Georgia State in 2017.

So, which HBCU has the best chance to pull off an upset this year? Here's every Division I HBCU playing an FBS team, ranked from least likely to most likely to win.

Bethune-Cookman

FBS opponent: Miami (Fla.)

Reason: Miami shut out Bethune-Cookman 63-0 the last time the teams met in 2019. Miami has won all five meetings by a combined 232-37. Bethune-Cookman is coming off its first losing season since 2016.

Southern

FBS opponent: LSU

Reason: LSU, which is coming off its first losing season since 1999, has plenty to prove in Year 1 of the Brian Kelly era. It's the first meeting in football between LSU and Southern, which are both located in Baton Rouge, and the Tigers aren't likely to drop it.

Arkansas-Pine Bluff

FBS opponent: Oklahoma State

Reason: Pine Bluff tied with Bethune-Cookman for the SWAC's worst record last year. Oklahoma State beat Notre Dame in the Fiesta Bowl last year.

Alabama State

FBS opponent: UCLA

Reason: Alabama State got demolished by Auburn 63-0 in its only Power Five matchup last year. This result shouldn't be much different.



FAMU safety Markquese Bell celebrates a sack last September. Bell is now with the Dallas Cowboys. TORI LYNN SCHNEIDER/THE TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

South Carolina State

FBS opponents: South Carolina, Central Florida

Reason: The reigning Celebration Bowl champs upset Jackson State last year and were one of three HBCUs to have a player (Decobie Durant, Los Angeles Rams) selected in this year's NFL draft. South Carolina does have a recent FCS loss to The Citadel in 2015, but the Gamecocks and UCF have big advantages against SCSU.

Florida A&M

FBS opponent: North Carolina

Reason: Florida A&M was one of the SWAC's best teams last year and represented the conference in the FCS playoffs. But North Carolina should have too much offensive firepower for this game to be close very long.

Texas Southern

FBS opponents: North Texas, Texas-San Antonio

Reason: Texas-San Antonio went 12-2 and won the C-USA championship last year. North Texas was the only Conference USA team to beat the Roadrunners. Texas Southern was surprisingly competitive in a 48-34 loss to Rice last year.

Morgan State

FBS opponent: Georgia Southern

Reason: Georgia Southern went 3-9 last year and had a scare against FCS Gardner-Webb in last season's opener. Morgan State hopes new coach Damon Wilson, who was a three-time Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA) Coach of the Year at the Division II level, can turn things around.

Tennessee State

FBS opponent: Middle Tennessee State

Reason: Eddie George's Tennessee State squad stays in the Middle Tennessee area for its only FBS matchup. TSU kept the deficit under three touchdowns the last time these teams met in 2019.

Grambling State

FBS opponent: Arkansas State

Reason: Arkansas State gave up 48 points or more four times last season. If Hue Jackson is able to dial up enough offense, Grambling could stand a chance against a Red Wolves team that had only one FBS win last year.

Norfolk State

FBS opponents: Marshall, James Madison

Reason: James Madison was one of the best FCS teams for years before joining the FBS ranks this year. JMU throttled the Spartans 75-14 in 2017 and won 17-0 in a lightning-shortened game the last time the teams met.

Howard

FBS opponent: South Florida

Reason: Since the UNLV upset, Newton has transferred twice and is now playing receiver at William & Mary. The Bison regressed to a 3-8 record last year. South Florida's record was worse at 2-10, but the Bulls still blew out their only MEAC opponent last year.

Alcorn State

FBS opponent: Tulane

Reason: Tulane scored 69 points against its only HBCU opponent, Morgan State, last year, but Alcorn should prove to be a tougher test for the Green Wave, which finished 2-10 last year.

North Carolina A&T

FBS opponent: Duke

Reason: North Carolina A&T struggled last year but is typically one of the biggest powerhouses in HBCU football. The Aggies have two FBS wins within the past five years. Last year, Duke beat North Carolina A&T by 28, but this year could be closer.

Alabama A&M

FBS opponents: UAB, Troy

Reason: Alabama A&M is loaded with FBS transfers and is one year removed from being SWAC champions. The Bulldogs have the best shot at taking home the first FBS win by an HBCU program since 2018.

FCS SCHEDULES NOTE

Schedules for FCS schools do not appear because issues in late June with conference alignments resulted in schedules being incomplete at press time. We will run them at a later date in an issue of USA TODAY Sports Weekly.

UCLA, USC will bolt to Big Ten in 2024



Paul Myerberg
Columnist
USA TODAY

College football's future belongs to two super conferences

With Southern California and UCLA working toward an exit from the Pac-12 to join the Big Ten in 2024, college football is poised to take an irreversible step toward the construction of two major conferences at the expense of tradition and the remaining Power Five leagues.

While viewed in administrative circles as a possibility since the first round of significant conference realignment a decade ago, the birth of these super leagues would create a chasm of space between the rest of the current Football Bowl Subdivision and the Southeastern Conference and Big Ten.

With USC and UCLA announcing the move to leave the Pac-12 on Thursday, it's the clearest signal yet that the top level of college football will center on dozens of teams married not by geography, rivalry or history but the chase for increasingly large media-rights payouts and broadcast deals. Instead of merely a possibility, these super conferences are now an inevitability.

When this latest conference realignment becomes official, the fallout will be swift and seismic.

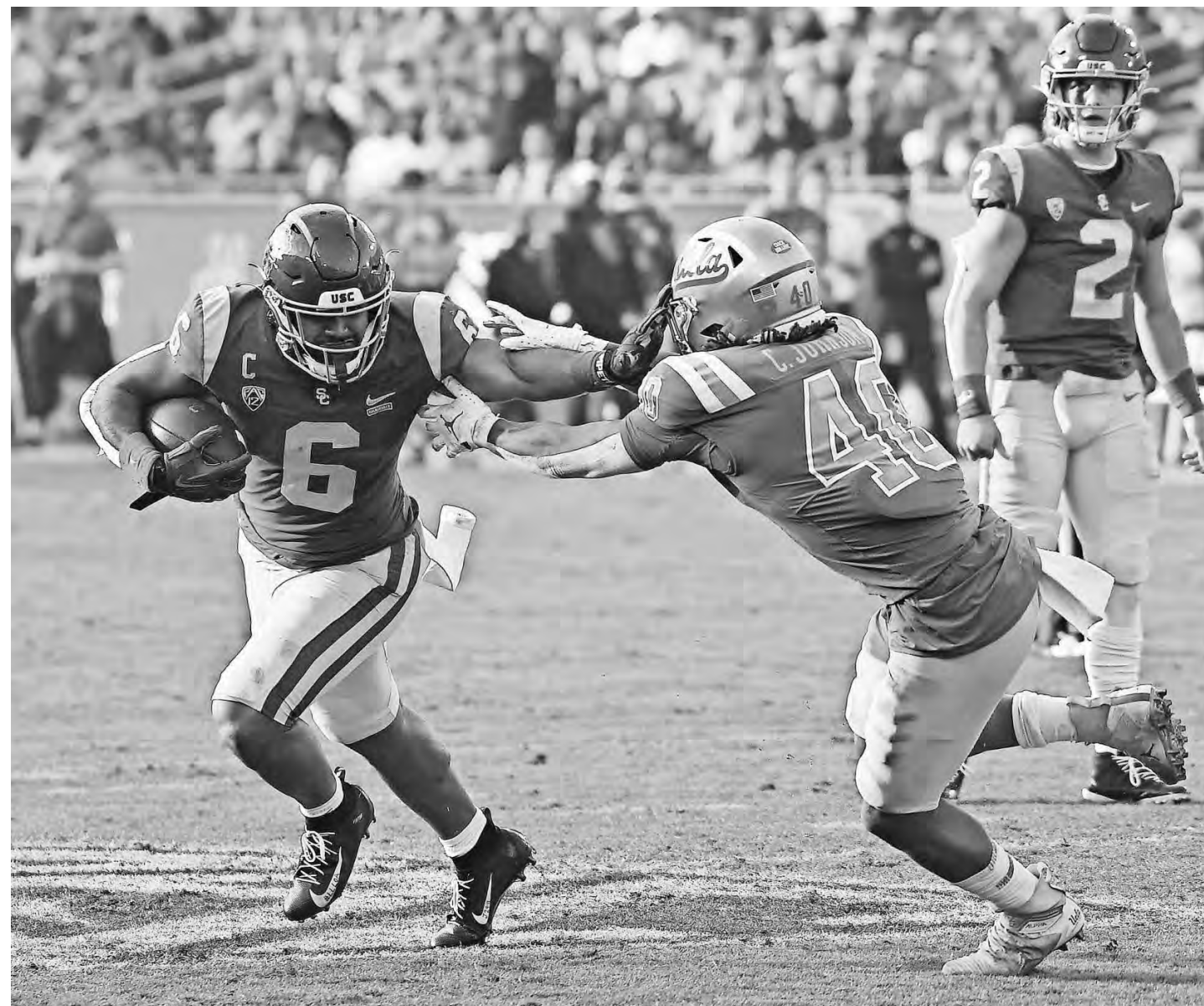
While the Big 12 was able to partially offset losing Texas and Oklahoma to the SEC by gobbling up the best teams from the American, the Pac-12 will have no options among the Group of Five ranks even remotely close to matching the reputation, success and television appeal of the two Los Angeles-based schools.

With the Trojans and Bruins able to secure a spot in the Big Ten, the Pac-12 could next lose Oregon and Washington, the next two members with the draw and support to be an option for further West Coast expansion.

In that scenario, the Pac-12 would need to dip deep in the Group of Five – for Boise State and San Diego State, to start – just to create a lineup of schools with enough relevance to simply maintain existence in the Football Bowl Subdivision.

Even in the hypothetical where the Pac-12 and Big 12 merge together, that league would still be miles behind the SEC and Big Ten in terms of overall competitiveness in the race for the national championship.

That leaves the Pac-12 with only one hope: That the Big Ten accepts the entire



USC running back Vavae Malepeai runs the ball against UCLA linebacker Caleb Johnson. RICHARD MACKSON/USA TODAY SPORTS

conference, warts and all, perhaps motivated by the longstanding relationship with the conference built through the Rose Bowl.

But doing so would dilute the Big Ten's overall strength and do nothing to move the needle during the league's current rights negotiations.

Instead of going deeper into the Pac-12, both the Big Ten and SEC could take aim at the best available programs elsewhere: Clemson, Florida State, Miami and the top tier of the Atlantic Coast, along with Notre Dame.

While the Irish aren't subject to the

same concerns, the flag-bearers in the ACC would be motivated to change conferences for the same reason USC and UCLA may jump ship: ACC schools will make millions less per year than the SEC and Big Ten, with the total set to grow dramatically when the Big Ten signs its new deal.

USC and UCLA are the tipping point for a new world order. Eventually, every school with designs on competing for the national championship will push and shove in an attempt to get to the front of the line and beat the crowd into one of the two super conferences.

That may result in the second major shake-up in the divisional structure of college football in the past 50 years, following the creation of Division I and Division I-AA (later renamed the FBS and Football Championship Subdivision) in 1978.

This time the split will place the two super leagues in one tier and the rest of the current FBS in another.

The unofficial gap between the haves and have nots will have a clear line of demarcation. The future of college football is clear: two super conferences will be center stage.

Michigan may have hidden treasure

Rainer Sabin

Detroit Free Press

Defense could hang on potential breakout player

Mazi Smith looked the same to Tony Kimbrough. Maybe, Kimbrough thought, the Michigan defensive tackle was a little thicker, a bit stronger.

At first glance, Kimbrough, the head coach at East Kentwood (Michigan) High School, couldn't detect much had changed with his former player when he paid a visit to his old stomping grounds this offseason. Then Smith opened his mouth, launching into a monologue.

"He just was a totally different guy," Kimbrough said.

More mature, confident and determined.

"It was a breath of fresh air," Kimbrough continued. "He's ready to put in the work, man. I can't wait to see what he ultimately becomes."

About 130 miles southeast, inside Schembechler Hall, neither can the Wolverines' coaching staff. Smith has been identified as a potential breakout player on Michigan's defense, which is being remodeled after its core disintegrated following the program's first appearance in the College Football Playoff.

Seven of the nine men who played the most snaps for coordinator Mike Macdonald's unit in 2021 have since left to pursue an NFL career. Of the two remaining from that group, one is Smith — a 6-foot-3, 326-pound fire plug who spent much of last season clogging running lanes, pushing the pocket and occupying blockers so the talented tandem of edge rushers, Aidan Hutchinson and David Ojabo, could topple the quarterback. Those two accounted for 74% of the team's sacks in 2021, which means Michigan will be hard-pressed to match their production. Almost all that is left, after all, is a group of untested players with bare stat lines.

But Macdonald's successor, Jesse Minter, is trying to find some solutions so the defensive front can maintain its bite.

Smith, with his power and



Michigan defensive lineman Mazi Smith is expected to help stem the loss of sacks from Aidan Hutchinson and David Ojabo. KIRTHMON F. DOZIER/DETROIT FREE PRESS

athleticism, is expected to help that cause as much as anyone on the roster.

"It starts with Mazi," Minter said this offseason. "I think he has the potential to be a dominant player for us. He's played a lot. He's played a good amount of snaps. He's been in a role in the defense where he was asked to do some things (that) have taken up blocks and all that, and he'll still do that. He's tremendous at that. But I also think there's an opportunity for him to become a playmaker and use his skill set. I think he's quick, fast, big, physical."

That natural talent suggests he could become an effective pass rusher from his spot at the nose. In an age when quarter-

backs are taught to deliver the ball as soon as possible and offensive plays are designed with that idea in mind, there is tremendous value in generating pressure from up the middle.

"The quickest way to an object is a straight line," New York Jets defensive lineman Quinnen Williams said in 2018, when he was a redshirt sophomore at Alabama. "So if you're in the nose and you go straight to the quarterback, that's the quickest way."

That season, Williams transformed from little-known reserve into a future top-five draft pick, dominating games as the de facto fulcrum in Alabama's defense. It's impossible to determine whether Smith has the

capability of following a similar track as Williams. He has never recorded a sack and has contributed just 3½ tackles for loss in 21 career games.

Smith, a former four-star prospect who once received a scholarship offer from the Crimson Tide, felt unsettled during his first two seasons in Ann Arbor. He was a bit player under former coordinator Don Brown, who often deployed smaller, lighter tackles and preferred them to handle one gap at a time.

"Nothing against Don Brown," Kimbrough said, "but he and Mazi just weren't on the same page. ...

"He went from barely playing in Coach Brown's system to

flourishing (with Macdonald)."

Just one look at Smith's bio on the Michigan website reveals how much his trajectory changed last season. Prior to 2021, his accomplishments could be summed up with nine bullet points. Last fall, as an honorable mention All-Big Ten selection, that number doubled. Macdonald unlocked Smith's potential, primarily using him on early downs to muck up the opponent's ground game and keep the offense behind schedule.

By the end of the season, Smith was one of Michigan's most consistent run stoppers. Only Donovan Jeter had a lower missed-tackle rate than Smith, according to Pro Football Focus.

"But you can't be a great football player without being at least a good pass rusher," Smith said. "Elite run stopper, good pass rusher, elite pass rusher, good run stopper — it all goes hand in hand. So, I gotta keep working."

Smith, who speaks softly and exudes modesty, has been doing so quietly. Unlike Hutchinson or Ojabo, he isn't a dynamic personality. On social media, he maintains a low profile, choosing to share his teammates' messages more often than his own. But Smith could be just as important as those two stars for a Michigan program that hopes to replicate the success of last season.

"We've lost some edge presence, and (pressure) has to be generated somewhere," new defensive line coach Mike Elston said.

Then, unprompted, he singled out one player who might help make up the difference.

"Mazi Smith," Elston said, "is a very capable pass rusher."

Kimbrough has no doubts that is true even though the evidence supplied so far doesn't support that claim.

"When Mazi puts his mind to something," Kimbrough said, "there is nothing stopping him."

The blockers standing between Smith and the quarterback have been put on notice.